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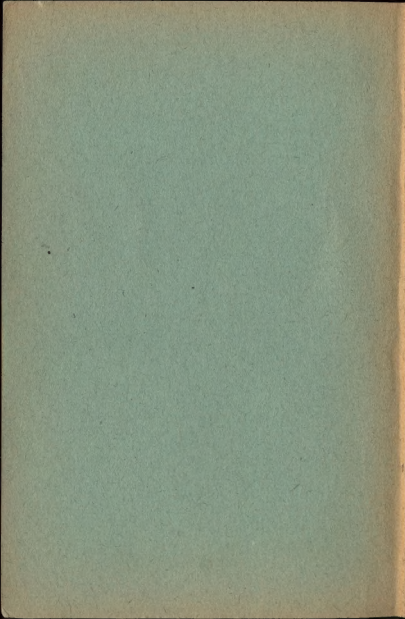
HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS • ALAN LEMAY

W. C. TUTTLE • WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

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SELECTED WESTERN STORIES

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ACTION STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

SELECTED WESTERN STORIES

Edited by Leo Margulies



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FOREWORD

SOMEONE once said, "men are but boys grown tall." And boys are dreamers ever.

This fact explains, perhaps, the undying popularity of the Western Story with the boys of America and other lands, be they sixteen or sixty.

Adventure, romance, achievement—those are the dreams of the little boy, wide-eyed and wistful, as he sits gazing beyond the horizon of the real world into the infinity of imagination. Dreams of a sinewy horseman who rides, lounging carelessly in his saddle, from the scarlet and rose of the morning, through the golden blaze of noon, to the purple twilight of evening.

With the crisp rangeland winds fluttering his gay neckerchief he rides, as cliff and chimney rock fling back the sprightly echo of his horse's pattering irons from skyline to skyline—the most glamorous figure the world has ever known.

"That's what I'll be when I grow up—a cowboy!" says the little dreamer. "I'll have a horse that can show his heels to anything on four feet. I'll pack a gun. I'll twirl a rope. I'll brand a steer. And some day I'll have a spread of my own. Or maybe I'll trudge across the desert behind a burro. I'll find gold out there where the sun shines down on the glittering sands. Or I'll drive a stagecoach. Or build a railroad."

Dreams! The dreams of a little boy looking into the future, unafraid.

And in factory, office and counting room, the dream still lives. Although the dreamer's hair now is touched with silver, his face lined, perhaps a little weary, his eyes not

quite so bright as when he started his journey, with his dreams, down the broad highway that is Life.

But still he dreams. And as he turns the printed page, again they come, out of the mist of dreams—the lean, bronzed horseman, spurs a-jingle and lips a-quirk; the grizzled prospector trudging at the tail of his old gray burro; the brawny miner wresting his treasure from Nature's stubborn breast.

The covered wagons, those white-winged ships of the plains, roll side by side with the lumbering stage. The home seeker, lean soldier of the sod, walks with his long rifle a-slant on his shoulder. The outlaw thunders past, glancing back at the gun smoke of the pursuing posse. The men and women who made the West pass in review.

And, shepherding his unruly flock, comes the western peace officer, stern, clear-eyed, relentless in his devotion to duty—the sheriff, the marshal, the ranger!

Folks of the mist of dreams! Yes. But they were real. They lived and had their being—in the West. They live again in the pages of this book you hold in your hand. A book of stories written by men who know the West and its people, because they are one with it and them.

No matter how fast or far a man rides, he can't ride away from his shadow. Long and dark, it stretches before him as the sun climbs the morning sky. High noon comes. And the shortening shadow vanishes. Ahead is only the sun-drenched trail. The horseman rides with puckered lids, on into the west. All is clear and bright ahead. But when he glances over his shoulder—there is the shadow. It's been there all the long afternoon. Many a mile he has covered since the rose and gold of dawn. But he never got one pace ahead of that dark and silent companion.

Cheyenne found that a man's past is very, very like his shadow. It may be behind him—far behind, it would seem. But, like the shadow, it's right there.

In "Across the Rio Grande," Frederick R. Bechdolt, a master yarn spinner, tells how the shadow of a man's past can dim the sunlight for himself and others. But when several "pasts" get tangled up together, the results are sometimes surprising. Cheyenne had a past. Brazos had a past. Even taciturn Bill Savage, the big boss, had a past. And they all got together to decide Cheyenne's future. This yarn has a surprise ending that will thrill and please.

A castle in the western badlands may seem a mite out of the ordinary, but Andy Green found one. After a week of travel across a gosh-awful country, the visitors from back East expressed their appreciation of Andy's discovery—warmly. Uncle Peter, the spread owner, recognized Andy's unusual talent and even went so far as to write a testimonial to his genius. Which gave Andy food for thought and sort of tangled his twine for him. You'll chuckle over the engaging wit and humor to be found in "Ananias Green" by B. M. Bower, author of the famous Happy Family stories.

Bill Hill learned that Opportunity is a funny sort of a jigger. In fact, Bill didn't recognize the gent when he came along. It looked like everything was going wrong and that he, Bill, was the Hard Luck Kid for fair. But just the same, things were shaping up to give Bill what he wanted more than anything else in the world. Not that it was handed to him all nicely roped and hogtied. Bill had to do his own roping and tieing.

How Bill did it in "The Two-Day Deputy" makes for a thrilling story done in the inimitable style of Eugene Cunningham, one of the old masters of western fiction.

"Crossing the Gorge" is undoubtedly one of the finest bits of work ever done by a writer who is noted for outstanding writing. This little story is a thing of sheer and delicate beauty and also tense with action. It is doubtful if O. Henry ever evolved a more unexpected and satisfying ending. Jackson Gregory at his best.

Nobody knows the West, or horses, better than Will

James. "On the Dodge" is a story of a man and his horse and the trouble both managed to get into, and get out of. The getting out required more than a little ingenuity plus quick thinking and cold nerve. Will James has a rare talent for plunging folks into difficulties that appear insurmountable. There isn't a dull moment in this one.

It's a long trail from Arizona to the Texas Panhandle, but Young Pete followed it to clear his name. Accused of killing a man he never saw, he set out to track down the real killers. How he did it makes an absorbing tale by one of the all-time greats of Western fiction. Henry Herbert Knibbs is a name that needs no introduction and no eulogy, and in "Young Pete Pays a Bill" he is at his best.

It's easy to love a fighting man. The reader of Alan LeMay's "The Contest Man" will quickly learn to love Joe Gill. And will not forget him soon. The Triangle R boys decided to have some fun with what they thought, at first, was a sort of mail order cowhand. How they proceeded to do it makes amusing reading.

William MacLeod Raine's "Fat Man in a Brown Derby" is a thrilling tale of cold nerve outfacing desperate odds. It looked like Meldrum, the gambler, held all the cards. Clint Lennon held nothing, except quick wit and courage. But they were stronger than the cocked .45 with which Meldrum menaced a man with his hands tied.

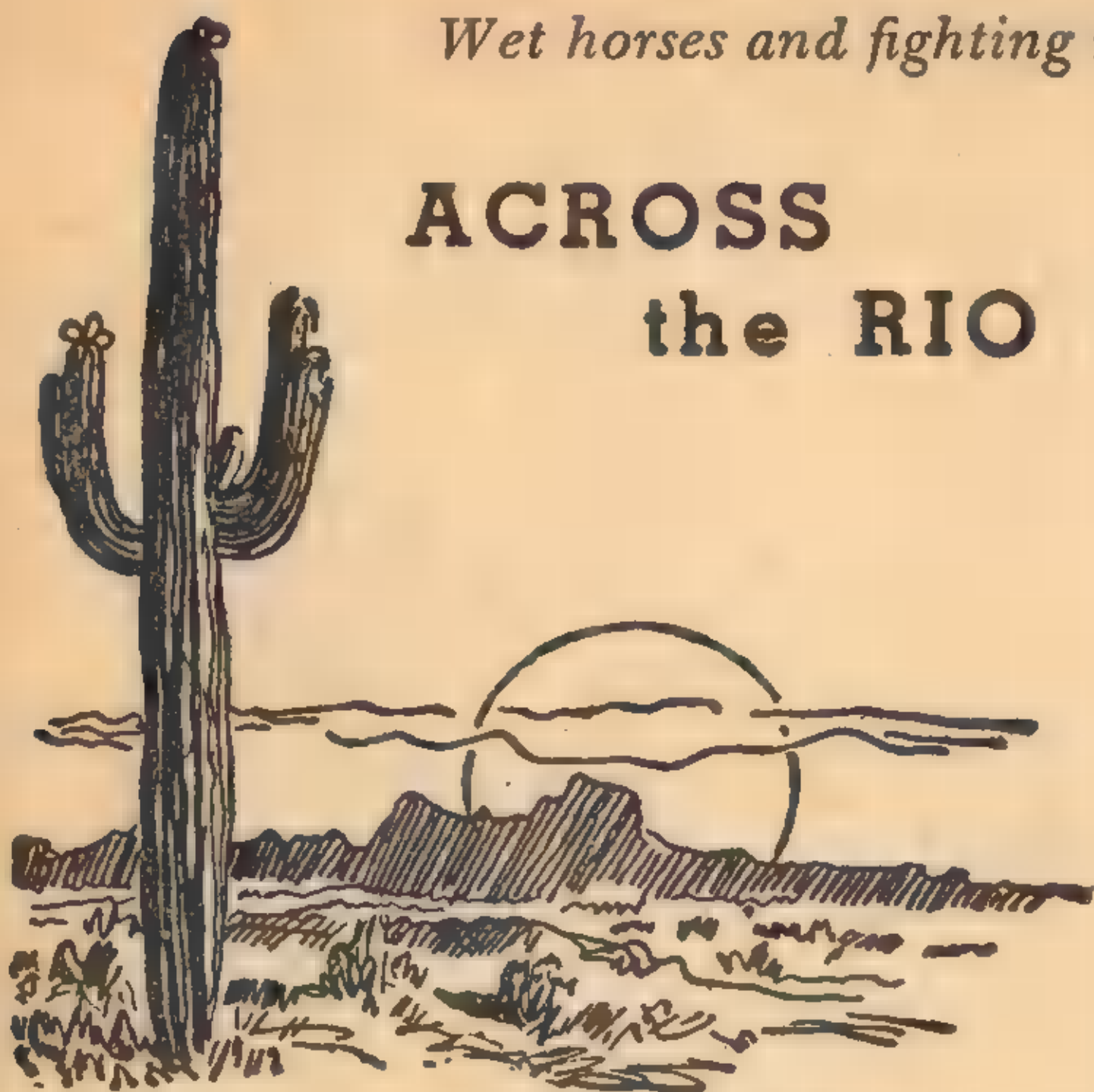
When that master of Western humor, W. C. Tuttle, rounds up Ike Harper, Magpie Simpkins, et al, the reader is in for a hilarious time. In "Psychology and Copper," the two scalawags manage to outsmart themselves in a way that will be heartily enjoyed by the reader.

When Owen Wister's name is mentioned, people think of "The Virginian" or "Lin McLean." But Wister wrote other stories just as gripping, just as poignant. "The Right Honorable the Strawberries" is one. This unusual yarn of a man the West claimed is fascinating and unique.

—Leo Margulies

Wet horses and fighting men

ACROSS the RIO GRANDE



by **FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT**

ONE day in the month of May this young fellow Cheyenne rode into San Antonio with his battered hat on the back of his head and the blazing devil of unrest abiding in his bold dark eyes. There, in the old plaza that warm afternoon, he fell in with another soft-voiced rowdy of the saddle who said his name was Brazos.

"I'm going to take a whirl at wet hosses," this adventurer announced after their acquaintance had been ripening for two hours or so in a bar. "Why don't you throw in with me?"

"Never heard tell of 'em," Cheyenne confessed. "Why are they wet?"

"Because you swim 'em acrost the Rio Grande," the other explained. "You run 'em off of them big *haciendas* down in Chihuahua. Sometimes the *vaqueros* think you're Apaches, but they never put up much of a fight."

Cheyenne signaled the bartender to return the whisky

bottle and considered briefly. He had been knocking about in southern Texas long enough to absorb the local code of morals which tolerated many things south of the line because of the Alamo's bitter memory; so such rough-and-ready scruples as he cherished concerning honor were not bothering him.

"How about sellin' 'em?" he asked at length.

"I know some cowmen here in San Antonio," Brazos replied when he had filled his glass, "who'll pay twenty-five dollars a head anywhere on this side of the river. Here's how."

"How." Cheyenne swallowed his whisky. "All right. I'll go you."

So, on that day in May, Cheyenne went into the business of wet horses, which would have been called by a harsher name had it been carried on north of the Rio Grande. And for some months, in company with Brazos and four or five others of the same reckless breed, he violated the laws of nations by looting and armed violence. Then, on an evening in the fervent month of August, he went out of business more abruptly than he had gone in.

The end of this wild chapter in his youth came in a little town of mud-colored adobes at the foot of some bleak dry mountains down Saltillo way. There were six in the band and they had been trying to break some of the monte games which were always running in the plaza after dusk. Now, as they were leading their ponies forth from the corral where they had been put up during the visit, they discovered that the narrow street, which had been deserted when they entered the pen, was occupied by a platoon of ragged soldiers, drawn up to command the gateway.

The moments which followed were filled to overflowing with swift action. Chief among the impressions which Cheyenne retained were the smell of burning powder, the irregular rattle of firing at close range, the scuffle of hoofs and the keen desire to get near enough to his frightened horse to seize the saddle-horn. Four

shots were gone from his revolver by the time he finally succeeded in mounting. While he was racing down the block he became conscious of a rider coming up beside him.

It was Brazos, and he was swaying in the saddle like a drunken man.

Cheyenne reined over until his leg was pressing the flank of the other pony and passed his arm around his companion's sagging shoulders. So they rode out of the village with the bullets droning above their heads; and during the next three weeks Cheyenne devoted his energies to doctoring the hole which a Mexican slug had left in Brazos's lungs and dodging soldiers in the arid mountains. By the time they were able to travel with any kind of speed it was evident that the army was still taking an active interest in their affairs; and on the night when they swam their horses across the Rio Grande, a company of cavalry were so close behind them that they could hear the rattle of the stirrup-leathers.

There was no doubt about it; the wet-horse project was a thing of the past. Brazos said as much while they were waiting for word of their companions in San Antonio.

"But I know of something else that beats it all to blazes," he went on hopefully. "These smugglers that come acrost the line to buy goods, with every mule in their pack-trains loaded down with 'dobe dollars."

Somehow or other, the idea did not have the same appeal to Cheyenne as its predecessor. There seemed to him—in spite of his free-and-easy code of morals—to be a difference between wet horses and dry silver dollars. However, he did not mention that. He merely shook his head.

"I reckon I'll be shovin' on," he said. "I want to see more of the country."

So they parted with mutual good feeling and Cheyenne rode on into the West, to see more country—and new faces.

In Tombstone, on a summer morning five years after-

ward, Bill Savage's young wife and her sister Molly were setting forth reluctantly for the home ranch down on the lonely border. Pretty women were scarce in the raw camp and there was no lack of presentable mining engineers, to say nothing of army officers from Fort Huachuca; so their week's visit had been a pleasant one. But their reluctance to depart had nothing to do with the good times which they were leaving behind them. In those days, when the smoke of Apache signal-fires was a frequent sight among the ragged mountains and when hard eyed outlaws were riding unhindered over the wide flats, the road to Bill Savage's home ranch was not the safest route in the world. And the cowboy who was to have been their guard had failed to put in an appearance.

"I was particular when that man, Bush Reddy, showed up last night, to tell him he must be on hand by six this morning." Young Mrs. Savage cast a final glance toward Allen Street where the saloons were, and sighed. "It's eight now. We can't wait any longer." She picked up the reins.

"I wish Bill had sent Cheyenne," Molly remarked as the buckboard was rattling down the wide street. There was a vividness in Molly's beauty at all times, but the color in her cheeks was higher than usual now. Her sister noted this and the glow that had come into her eyes.

"If we don't get home tonight," she declared quietly, ignoring the remark, "Bill will think something has happened and he'll have the men out looking for us. Anyway, perhaps Bush will catch up with us."

But the missing escort had no idea of catching up with them that day—in fact, he had no ideas on any subject whatever at the time, having succumbed to more than his share of Allen Street whisky some hours before. And the two sisters were destined to make the journey without him.

Having been in southeastern Arizona for a year, Mrs. Savage was beginning to look upon emergencies as the rule of life. As for Molly, she had seen enough of wild

incidents since she had left home in eastern Texas last spring, to make this mishap seem unworthy of worry.

So neither of them indulged in forebodings during the long drive southward; and the usual rumor of the Apaches being out, which they heard at the Double Dobe ranch, failed to disturb them very much. But when one of the team went lame at the Blackwater flats, and the dusk began to creep upon them more than twenty miles from home, the background of experience, which had kept them from useless fears before, revealed to them the ugly possibilities ahead of them. Here, in the heart of No-Man's Land, where naked savages and the renegades of two nations used to prey on one another, was no place for travelers after nightfall.

There was no more cheerful talk between them and Molly sat with lips compressed, holding on her lap a single-action revolver; while Mrs. Savage clenched the reins and tried to look ahead into the darkness. By the time they were going down the grade to Silver Creek only the eroded summits of some mountains off to the right were visible against the skyline. Now and again the lame horse stumbled and the rattling of the wheels grew louder with the increasing roughness of the road.

"Well, there's one consolation," Molly said, "Bill will get rid of Bush Reddy when he hears of this."

"I never liked that man, myself," her sister answered. "I knew by the look of him he wasn't trustworthy."

They were in the creek bed now; the buckboard lurched as the wheels passed over a large boulder. The two women fell silent again, wondering whether those were moving forms out there where the brittle shrubs were rustling in the night breeze, or merely figments of the imagination. The iron tires made weird noises on the stones. A quarter of a mile or so ahead, off on the mesa, a little flame was twisting lazily. Mrs. Savage pulled up the team.

"What do you think it is?" Molly whispered.

"Hush, dear. Camp-fire, the chances are. But you can't tell."

The bit of light subsided behind a shadow, then it rose into sight again. It might have been—as she had said—a camp-fire; but there had been times on this same road when such a light had come from the charred remnants of a wagon after the Apaches had finished amusing themselves with the luckless driver. So the two women sat frozen to silence, hoping for the night to reveal to them some sign of what it kept in hiding. Then there came a rattle of loose stones close by and Molly pointed the revolver at a blurred shape which had emerged from the surrounding darkness.

“You needn’t shoot,” the apparition said.

Molly lowered the hammer and dropped the six-shooter into her lap.

“Cheyenne!” Her voice was vibrant and there was something deeper than relief in it.

“Thank Heaven!” Mrs. Savage said. “I never was so glad to see one of the men.”

“There’s four of the boys down there, holdin’ a bunch of cows till mornin’.” He came a step closer and laid his hand upon the wheel. “I thought Bill had sent Bush Reddy to town after you.”

It was Mrs. Savage who told him of the cowboy’s failure to appear and of the lameness of the horse, which had delayed them; but while she spoke his eyes remained on Molly.

“If you’ll wait here till I can let the others know,” he said, “I’ll drive you on to the ranch.”

Five minutes later he was seated between them holding the reins and the horses were plodding onward through the darkness. Now, with the weight of responsibility removed from her shoulders young Mrs. Savage began to feel the weariness of the long journey. During the next three or four miles she struggled against the desire to sleep and the last thing of which she was conscious was the murmur of the two voices beside her.

They were traveling across the malpais flats, ten miles from home, when she awakened with a sudden sense of danger.

Tall clumps of mesquite lined the road on either side, dense blots of blackness in the night. Somewhere among them she heard the noise of rapid hoof beats coming toward the road. The sound grew louder and the team shied violently. The bushes cracked and she saw a horse and rider bursting through the gloom. They came to an abrupt halt, blocking the wagon track.

Then Molly whispered, "That man has a gun in his hand!"

And Cheyenne answered quietly. "So have I."

The calmness in his voice was as reassuring as the sight of the weapon which he was holding. Mrs. Savage saw its muzzle pointing toward the rider. And the rider saw it, too, for when she looked up again, he was reining off into the shadows.

"I reckon," Cheyenne said, "it was some line dodger huntin' for a little easy money." He pulled the team back into the road and thereafter the journey continued without further interruption. Before midnight Mrs. Savage was telling the story of their adventures to her husband in the ranchhouse living-room. When she came to the incident of the horseman she happened to glance at her younger sister.

"There's something on yore mind, sweet," Bill Savage told her afterward in their own room.

"It's Molly," she replied. "You don't suppose she'd be foolish enough to take Cheyenne too seriously, do you, Bill? I've noticed when she wants anything done by the men, he is the one she always picks for it. And—did you see the way she looked tonight when I was talking of him?"

But her husband was a stingy man when it came to words and the only comment he offered on the subject was a shrug of his burly shoulders.

To Bush Reddy, who rode in twenty-four hours later with a wild tale of having been drugged in a Tombstone saloon, he was a little more generous of speech.

"Here's yore pay—now hit the road," he said and turned away, leaving the discharged hand to learn of the

dangers which had befallen the two women from the cowboys, who took good pains to let the story lose nothing by their recital. Some men would have cherished the grudge of the lost job against their employer, but Bill Savage was not a wholesome person to pick for an enemy, and so Bush Reddy rode back to Tombstone nursing a grievance against Cheyenne. . . .

August went by, and September. October was well along, the month when the wind dies and the sun grows gentle and all the land along the border falls under a golden spell. On an enchanted evening when the long malpais flats under the mesa were throbbing in the glow of the sunset and the purple summits of the Sierra Madre were beginning to turn black against the sky, Bill Savage found his wife sitting on the veranda and drew up his chair beside her.

"Where's Molly gone?" The question was an idle one, but he saw the worry in her eyes as she answered:

"Cheyenne took her for a drive—with those colts he's been breaking."

"Don't fret, sweet." He laid his hand on hers. "He'll handle 'em all right."

She shook her head. "It isn't the colts. It's Cheyenne, Bill. What do you know about him?"

"Humph." He was silent for a few moments, sorting out his ideas that he might give them expression with as few words as possible. Then, "Seen him work. Seen him fight—that time we run them Apaches down into the Sierra Madre. Seen him drink in Tombstone. He suits me."

He closed his lips like a miser drawing his purse-strings, reluctant to spend more; but after a little interval he went on again. "Fact is, I'm sendin' him below Fronteras after them hosses I bought fer the San Pedro ranch tomorrow mornin'."

"So Molly told me this afternoon." She saw that had surprised him and she renewed her attack on his taciturnity. "Haven't you noticed her, Bill? It's been getting worse ever since that night when Cheyenne drove us

in from Silver Creek. They've been together every evening for two months."

"I aim to put him in charge of the San Pedro ranch, ef he makes good on this hoss job," he told her. "That's prospects enough fer a man to marry on."

"But that's not the idea." She withdrew her hand from his and laid it on his arm. "Bill, you know how many renegades have drifted into this country. And Cheyenne never says a word about his past. It's common talk among the cowboys that if you speak of Texas to him, he'll change the subject. I don't like the looks of that."

"Man's got a right to keep his mouth shet," he answered doggedly. "Cheyenne's clean strain. I wouldn't trust him with ten thousand dollars' worth of hosses ef I wasn't sure of him."

While this conversation was going on at the ranch-house Cheyenne and Molly were talking of the errand which was to take him down into Mexico. And if Mrs. Savage could have seen them then, she would have realized that things had been progressing considerably further than outsiders dreamed.

The two half-broken colts were tugging on their bits; now one of them would rear, lifting its front feet from the earth; now both would surge forward, trying to break into a run. Occasionally he gave them head for a few steps, then brought them down to a dancing walk, holding the reins between the strong fingers of one hand. The other arm was around Molly's waist and her head was nestling against his shoulder. The shadows were creeping down from the western mountains. Cheyenne's voice was very soft now.

"When Bill told me this afternoon that it was me he aimed to send down there, he as much as said he would put me in charge of the San Pedro ranch after I got back." He broke off for a moment and there was pride in Molly's eyes as she watched him soothing the restless colts. "You understand how much that job would mean, dear? It would put me in shape where I would have a right to marry you."

"I understand," she answered softly. "I was hoping he would pick you."

"Then it will be all right—when I come back?" He looked down into her face and, seeing his answer in her eyes, he bent his head to kiss her. The colts surged forward and the sharp fragments of malpais clinked to their dancing hoofs. When he had restrained them, he spoke again. "Sometimes I wonder at this luck that has come to me now. It seems like more than any man deserves. And me. I have rode wild and had my fling, as the sayin' is. Yet there was nothin', after all, that I'm ashamed of."

Ahead of them the ranchhouse showed, a smudged outline upon the summit of the mesa.

"In the morning you'll ride out," she whispered, "and I'll be watching when you go. But we must say our good-bye now, dear."

"Yes, now." He nodded. "A while back it crossed my mind to ask you if I couldn't tell Bill and your sister about this tonight. And then it came to me how it would be best to wait until he decides for sure to send me over to the San Pedro ranch. You see, I'd rather he would give me the job just on the strength of what I've done, without knowin' I was to be his brother-in-law."

So, while the colts chafed under the restraining reins, they said their good-bye after the manner of lovers the world over, and in the morning when he rode away alone into the south upon his errand, he looked back at the long adobe ranchhouse and waved his hand. And Molly watched him from the wide veranda, riding on and on until he and his horse became a speck in the distance. Then the speck vanished and there remained only the mysterious reaches where the long plain and the remote mountains and the cloudless sky seemed to merge behind a haze of rising heat-waves.

Now, every morning when she rose, Molly would go out on the long veranda and her eyes would seek that spot down in old Mexico where the earth and mountains and the sky seemed to meet. And during the days

she found herself spending most of her leisure hours sitting in one of the rustic chairs watching this place where her lover had vanished from her sight, where she would first discover him on his home-coming.

A strange shy pride was in her heart, a pride that made her head go back and brought a light into her eyes when she thought of him, which strove to conceal itself from all others.

One afternoon when Cheyenne had been gone more than a week, young Mrs. Savage found her sister sitting here.

"I was looking for you all over the house," she said. "Bill promised to ride over to Skeleton Canyon with me and now he's got some cattle to look after. Won't you go instead, dear?"

Molly, who would have liked nothing better than to remain there in that chair day-dreaming until dinner-time, declared she would be very glad to go. And so it happened that the two of them in their long-skirted riding-habits were passing the bunkhouse on their way to the corral just in time to be eavesdroppers on an argument which was not intended for their ears. It was the voice of one of the cowboys that halted them.

"All that I'm tellin' you is what they're sayin' in Tombstone about Cheyenne."

"Well, who's a-sayin' it an' what do they say?" The second voice was argumentative.

"Bush Reddy was the one told me. He done said that Cheyenne used to be a hoss-thief back in Texas. Seems like a bartender in the Crystal Palace knew him in San Antone. He claims they was five or six in the gang and they did a big business. Then things got too hot fer 'em; they busted up, an' Cheyenne, he went West."

"Bush Reddy," the second voice stated with profane interpolation, "is a liar. So is the bartender an' so is anybody else that tells that story."

"Mebbe he is," the first voice asserted hotly, "but fer all anybody knows, Cheyenne might of stole hosses."

"Yes; an' fer all anybody knows," the second voice

answered witheringly, "you might be one of the James brothers. Only you ain't man enough to rob a train."

"That'll do now," the foreman's voice cut in. "This here is Cheyenne's business and he'll tend to it when he gets back."

Mrs. Savage felt Molly's hand upon her arm. The girl's lips were white, but her voice was without a quiver.

"I don't think I'll go riding, dear," she said, and they returned to the house in silence.

When his wife told him of the cowboys' talk that evening, Bill Savage's eye narrowed.

"I wouldn't like to be Bush Reddy when Cheyenne gets back," he commented.

"But supposing, Bill, he doesn't come back?" Her eyes were wide with the dread she had been feeling all the afternoon. "Supposing that was the truth? And now he's down there in Mexico with ten thousand dollars' worth of horses and only *vaqueros* in his outfit."

"Listen, sweet," he told her quietly, "those are my hosses and I ain't a-worryin'."

Thereafter, every day when Molly went out on the veranda to look into the south toward the spot where the plain and the mountains and the cloudless sky seemed to meet behind a haze of heat-waves, she would lift her head proudly, and a light would come into her eyes. For she had felt the presence of the doubt which her sister held; and the knowledge made her own faith in her absent lover deeper than before.

Always, when she was here, she used to count the days which must still pass before he would come home. Ten days; then nine; then eight; and then a week. Always she watched the spot down there in the mysterious distance and thought of the time when the faint pillar of dust would appear there, rising toward the cloudless sky—the signal of the coming herd.

The week dragged to an end, and her face was weary with the waiting. Then there came a day when she sat on the veranda through the long hours from dawn until sunset. But the sky down in the south remained untar-

nished in its brightness. And on the day after there was no sign. Nor on the next.

The sun was climbing over the Sierra Madre, warming the long flat, casting brittle shadows beside every little stone and brush clump. Out here where the land began to climb up toward the mountains someone in years gone by had built a hut. Cheyenne was sitting by the aperture, where once a door had hung, and his saddle-horse was standing near by.

Two hundred yards or so away, four swarthy *vaqueros* were riding up the talus-strewn slope which narrowed as it rose between low hills, picturesque figures in their enormous sombreros and flaring trousers. Beyond the spot where the round hills drew together, meeting the steeper slopes of the Sierra, a sort of amphitheater opened among the cliffs. A band of two hundred sleek-coated horses were cropping the bunches of tawny grass which carpeted its floor. From where Cheyenne was sitting he could see many of them through the contracted gateway which had been riven in the rocks.

Now, as he waited for the dark-skinned riders to bring them out from the natural corral for the day's long drive, his mind went to the future and the hopes it held. To-day and one day more and he would have them safe at the home ranch; the responsibility would be over and his work well done. Other work and greater responsibilities would be awaiting him. He thought of Molly and the news the two of them had planned to tell when the new job was given him. And then, by some quirk of fancy, the memory of old days came to him and he mused aloud, after the habit he had got on many a lonely ride, choosing his horse for confidant.

"This is the first time I've been acrost the line since then." His voice was gentle and he was smiling. "Well, it is a heap different now. It was wet hosses then and these—" His eyes went to the canyon mouth and they hardened. The smile vanished from his lips.

Several horsemen were riding down from the low hills. He saw the glint of sunlight on a rifle barrel and a little

puff of smoke; the weapon's flat report came to his ears. One of his *vaqueros* had pitched forward from the saddle and was lying asprawl among the fragments of talus; the others had whirled their ponies and were fleeing down the long slopes.

Cheyenne was on his feet and as he hurried toward his saddle-horse the rattle of the approaching hoofs grew louder. The animal lifted its head and began to move away.

"Easy, boy." It stopped at the soothing voice and he gained its side.

The Mexicans went thundering past. A spurt of gravel fragments rose at Cheyenne's feet, and he heard the angry buzz of a slug close by. He glanced up the slope; two of the riders had dismounted and thin wisps of smoke rose above the places where they were lying.

"Those fellers are ol' hands," he said as he pulled his rifle from its sheath beneath the stirrup-leather. "I reckon this ain't goin' to be so easy."

He flung himself upon the earth and lined his sights on one of the forms up there among the rocks. The pony snorted at the report of the weapon and began trotting away. But he paid no heed to that; it was those horses in the draw that he was thinking of just now; of them and of these riders who were after them.

They were no Mexicans; he had known that by their hats from the beginning. That they were seasoned fighters was being made evident at every minute by the nearness of the bullets which snarled past him. When he had fired his third shot, he leaped to his feet and started running toward the doorway of the stone hut. Some bits of flying rock stung his face as he was passing inside. He dropped on the hard earthen floor and brought his rifle to his shoulder again. But the slope between him and the canyon mouth was empty now.

"As long as I'm here," he reflected, "nobody's goin' to be able to cross that ground. And bein' as they ain't a window, they can't rush this place only from the one way."

He pumped another cartridge into the breech and shifted his position to make himself more comfortable and then he was conscious of something warm and sticky on his thigh. He glanced down and saw a dark red stain spreading over the leg of his breeches. In the excitement of those few moments out there, he had not felt the bullet when it struck.

While he was binding his handkerchief above the spot where the blood was welling through the fabric a sudden sense of weakness came over him; his head was swimming and the walls of the hut seemed to be moving. He shut his teeth and tied the knot with numbing fingers; then he inserted the barrel of his revolver and twisted it until the ligature was biting into the muscles. Small beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead when he had done, and his arms had grown heavy so that he could hardly move them to lift his rifle.

The hillside was still empty save for the body of the slain *vaquero*. He could see a buzzard hovering in the sky above it. The time went by. It might have been an hour—he did not know. He only knew that the blood was still oozing from the wound and he was growing weaker.

Outside, somewhere near by, a voice sounded. "Come through that door with your hands up," it said.

He would have liked to answer with profane defiance, but he was afraid his voice would betray the weakness of his body. So he remained silent.

There came to him the knowledge of what must take place. The hard-eyed rustlers driving the band of horses up across the border. The people at the ranchhouse waiting for his return—Bill Savage and his wife and Molly. Waiting for some word from him. And none would come.

The *vaqueros* were hired riders whom he had picked up, and he understood that type of Mexican well enough to be certain they would never tell their story lest they be accused of complicity in his murder. They would simply disappear. And he would disappear.

And that would be the last of it—excepting they would remember him up there at the ranchhouse. They would remember him and they would wonder what had happened to him and to those horses with which he had been entrusted. There would be nothing on which their faith in him could rest, save what they had known of him. And that was very little.

He shut his teeth more tightly, for the weakness was mounting from his limbs. He could feel it rising over his body. It seemed to him that he heard footsteps outside the wall. They were coming toward the door from both sides. In a moment they would make their rush. He was thinking of Molly as he gripped his rifle and strove to press the butt closer against his shoulder, and that was the last he knew.

So the outlaws found him when they made their rush, lying limp and senseless with the weapon beside him on the earthen floor. . . .

The eastern sky was still glowing with the tints of sunrise when Bill Savage came out on the long veranda to find Molly there before him. She looked around at the sound of his footstep and pointed to the south. He stood for some moments gazing across the tawny plain.

"I reckon yo'r eyes are better'n mine, Molly," he told her gently; but a moment later he spoke again and a change had come into his voice. "Yo're right, Sis. Someone is comin'."

Away to the southward, near the meeting-place of earth and sky, the faint dust signal of a moving herd was rising like a wisp of smoke. And as the two of them watched, it darkened, taking on more definite outline.

"Hosses," Bill Savage said. "It moves too fast for cattle."

Within the house young Mrs. Savage heard their voices and came out to slip her arm about her sister. So the three of them remained standing on the veranda, watching the approaching dust cloud. The time slipped by; the sun was casting sharp shadows on the plain below the mesa where the ranchhouse stood.

At last they were able to distinguish the forms of the horses shrouded in the thin brown haze. They came trotting on with upraised heads, now halting to search for wisps of dry feed, now falling into a trot once more as the others came pressing on them from the rear. The cattleman had ceased to regard them. It was the riders who were monopolizing his attention.

"Those ain't *vaqueros*," he muttered.

The band came near. One of the riders shot forward passing its front, to fling himself from the saddle at the entrance of the thousand-acre pasture and let down the bars. Other horsemen sped in on either side to turn the leaders. While the ponies galloped to and fro, Bill Savage continued to search the dust clouds for Cheyenne.

The last of the band were passing into the enclosure. The dust was settling. The unknown herders had wheeled their ponies and were riding off into the south whence they had come. One man was left. His head was bowed; his body was sagging in the saddle. He came slowly up the mesa toward the ranchhouse, and the watchers on the veranda saw it was Cheyenne. His face was white and there was pain in the lines about his lips when they hurried out to meet him.

"Help me off, Bill," he said to the cattleman, but his eyes were on Molly all the time.

On the ranchhouse porch he told the story. When he came to the place where he had swooned, he looked away from Molly's face for the first time and pointed after the receding forms of the strange horsemen, growing faint where the long flat began to take on the mysteries of distance.

"Those are the men I was fightin'," he said, "and they're a hard bunch—outlawed every one of 'em. But the leader of the gang—the big he wolf among 'em—is a fellow by the name of Brazos. Five years ago, it happened, me and him was pardners and I did him a good turn—" He recited briefly the tale of the wet horses, and when he had finished; "He recognized me when they rushed the house and found me lyin' on the floor. So he

took care of me, and as soon as I could travel, he made those renegades drive the hosses up here."

An hour later Molly and Cheyenne were alone on the veranda.

"Next month," he announced, "Bill says I'm to take charge of the San Pedro ranch. Are you goin' with me, little girl?"

She came closer to him until her head was resting on his shoulder and she uttered a sigh, for the passing of her ordeal had left her weary in this moment of her happiness.

"This morning," she answered, "we'll tell them, dear."

Just how much need there was of that, one may judge from the tenor of another conversation which was going on at the same time in the living room, where young Mrs. Savage was relieving herself of something which was still upon her mind.

"Not that I'm opposed to their marrying," she declared, "but, after all, it was horse-stealing, Bill."

"I wish, sweet," he replied, "yo'd find some other name for it. Yo' see—Cheyenne don't know it, but I was one of the fellers back there in San Antone five years ago that was buyin' those wet hosses."

ANANIAS GREEN

by B. M. BOWER

*A tamer of wild ones
tells a tall one*



PINK, because he knew well the country and because Irish, who also knew it well, refused point-blank to go into it again, rode alone except for his horses down into the range of the Rocking R. General roundup was about to start, and there was stock bought by the Flying U which ranged north of the Bear Paws.

The owner of the Rocking R was entertaining a party of friends at the ranch; friends quite new to the West and its ways, and they were intensely interested in all pertaining thereto. Pink gathered that much from the crew.

Sherwood Branciforte was down in the blacksmith shop at the Rocking R, watching Andy Green hammer a spur-shank straight. Andy was a tamer of wild ones, and he was hard upon his riding gear. Sherwood had that morning watched with much admiration the bending of that same spur-shank, and his respect for Andy was beautiful to behold.

"Lord, but this is a big, wild country," he was saying enthusiastically.

"Wild," said Andy. "Yes, you've got us sized up correct." He went on hammering, and humming under his breath.

"Oh, but I didn't mean that," the young man protested. "What I meant was breezy and picturesque. Life and men don't run in grooves."

"No, nor horses," assented Andy. He was remembering how that spur-shank had become bent.

"You did some magnificent riding, this morning, by Jove! Strange that one can come out here into a part of the country absolutely new and raw——"

"Oh, it ain't so raw as you might think," Andy defended jealously, "nor yet new."

"Of course it is new! You can't," he said, "point to anything man-made that existed a hundred years ago; scarcely fifty, either. Your civilization is yet in the cradle—a lusty infant." Sherwood Branciforte had given lectures before the Y. M. C. A. of his home town, and young ladies had spoken of him as 'gifted.'

Andy Green squinted at the shank before he made reply. Andy, also, was 'gifted,' in his modest Western way. "A country that can now and then show the papers for a civilization old as the Phoenixes of Egypt," he said, in a drawling tone that was absolutely convincing, "ain't what I'd call raw."

Andy decided that a little more hammering right next the rowel was necessary, and bent over the anvil solicitously. Even the self-complacency of Sherwood Branciforte could not fail to note his utter indifference. Branciforte was not accustomed to indifference. He blinked.

"My dear fellow, do you realize what that statement might seem to imply?" he said.

Andy, being a cowpuncher of the brand known as a "real," objected strongly both to the term and the tone. He stood up and stared down at the other disapprovingly. "I don't as a general thing find myself guilty of talking

in my sleep. We ain't no infant-in-the-cradle, Mister. We had civilization here when the Pilgrim Fathers' rock wasn't nothing but a pebble to let fly at the birds!"

"Indeed!" sneered Sherwood Branciforte.

Andy clicked his teeth together, which was a symptom it were well for the other to recognize but did not. Then Andy smiled, which was another symptom. He fingered the spur absently, laid it down and reached for his papers and tobacco sack.

"Of course, you mean all right, and you ain't none to blame for what you don't know, but you're talking wild. When you tell me I can't point to nothing man-made that's fifty years old, you make me feel sorry for yuh. I can take you to something that's older than swearing; and I reckon that art goes back a long ways."

"Are you crazy, man?" Sherwood Branciforte exclaimed incredulously.

"Not what you can notice. You wait while I explain. Once last fall I was riding by my high lonesome away down next the river, when my horse went lame on me from slipping on a shale bank, and I was set afoot. Uh course, you being plumb ignorant of our picturesque life, you don't half know all that might signify to imply." This last in open imitation of Branciforte. "It implies that I was in one hell of a fix, to put it elegant. I was sixty miles from anywhere, and them sixty half the time standing one end and lapping over on themselves.

"So there I was, and I wasn't in no mood to view the beauties uh nature. I was high and dry and the walking was about as poor as I ever seen; and my boots was high-heel and rubbed blisters before I'd covered a mile of that territory. I wanted water; and I wanted it bad. Before I got it I wanted it a heap worse." He stopped, cupped his slim fingers around a match-blaze.

Branciforte sat closer. He almost forgot the point at issue in the adventure.

"Along about dark, I camped for the night under a big, bare-faced cliff, made a bluff at sleeping and cussed my bum luck. At sun-up I rose and wandered around

like a doggy when it's first turned loose on the range. All that day I perambulated over them hills, and I will say I wasn't enjoying the stroll none. You're right when you say things can happen, out here. Getting lost and afoot in the Badlands is one.

"That afternoon I dragged myself up to the edge of ■ deep coulee and looked over to see if there was any way of getting down. There was a bright green streak down there that couldn't mean nothing but water. And over beyond, I could see the river that I'd went and lost. I looked and looked, but the walls looked straight as a Boston's man's pedigree. And then the sun come out from behind a cloud and lit up a spot that made me forget for a minute that I was thirsty as ■ dog and near starved besides.

"I was looking down on the ruins—and yet it was near perfect—of an old castle. Every stone stood out that clear and distinct I could have counted 'em. There was ■ tower at one end, partly fell to pieces but yet enough left to easy tell what it was. I could see it had kind of loop-holes in it. There was an open place where I took it the main entrance had used to be; what I'd call the official entrance. But there was other entrances besides, and some of 'em was made by time and hard weather. There was what looked like a ditch running around my side of it, and a bridge. Uh course, it was all needing repairs bad.

"I laid there for quite a spell looking it over. It didn't look to me like it ought to be there at all, but in a school geography or a history."

"The deuce! A castle in the Badlands!" said Branciforte.

"That's what it was, all right. I found a trail it would make a mountain sheep seasick to follow, and I got down into the coulee. It was lonesome as sin, and spooky; but there was a good spring close by, and ■ creek running from it, and you can gamble I filled up on it a-plenty. Then I shot a rabbit or two that was hanging out around the ruins, and camped there till next day, when I found a pass out, and got my bearings by the river and come on

into camp. So when you throw slurs on our plumb newness, I've got the cards to call yuh. That castle wasn't built last summer, Mister. And whoever did build it was some civilized. So there yuh are."

Andy took a last, lingering pull at the cigarette stub, flung it into the blackened forge, and picked up the spur. He settled his hat on his head, and started for the door and the sunlight.

"Oh, but say! didn't you find out anything about it afterwards? There must have been something——"

"If it's relics uh the dim and musty past yuh mean, there was; relics to burn. I kicked up specimens of ancient dishes, and truck like that, while I was prowling around for fire-wood. And inside the castle, in what I reckon was used for the main hall, I run acrost a skeleton. That is, part of one."

"But, man alive, why haven't you made use of a discovery like that?" Branciforte followed him out, lighting his pipe with fingers that trembled. "Don't you realize what a thing like that means?"

Andy turned and smiled lazily down at him. "At the time I was there, I was all took up with the idea uh getting home. I couldn't *eat* skeletons, Mister, nor yet the remains uh prehistoric dishes. A man could starve to death while he examined it thorough. And so far as I know there ain't any record of it. I never heard no one mention building it, anyhow."

Andy stooped and adjusted the spur to his heel to see if it were quite right, and went off to the stable humming under his breath.

Branciforte stood at the door of the blacksmith shop and gazed after him, puffing meditatively at his pipe. "Lord! the ignorance of these Western folk! To run upon a find like that, and to think it less important than getting home in time for supper. To let a discovery like that lie forgotten, a mere incident in a day's travel! That fellow thinks more, right now, about his horse going lame and himself raising blisters on his heels, than of—Jove, what ignorancel!"

Branciforte knocked his pipe gently against the door-casing, put it into his coat pocket and hurried into the house.

That night the roundup pulled in to the home ranch.

The visitors, headed by their host, swooped down upon the roundup wagons just when the boys were gathered together for a cigarette or two apiece and a little talk before rolling in. There was no night-guarding to do. Sherwood Branciforte hunted out Andy Green where he lay at ease with head and shoulders propped against a wheel of the bed-wagon and gossipped with Pink and a few others.

"Look here, Green," he said in a voice to arrest the attention of the whole camp, "I wish you'd tell the others that tale you told me this afternoon—about that ruined castle down in the hills. Mason, here, is a newspaper man; he scents a story for his paper. And the rest refuse to believe a word I say."

"I'd hate to have a rep like that, Mr. Branciforte," Andy said, and turned his big, honest gray eyes to where stood the women—two breezy young persons with sleeves rolled to tanned elbows and cowboy hats of the musical comedy brand. Also they had gay silk handkerchiefs knotted picturesquely around their throats. There was another, a giggly, gurgly lady with gray hair fluffed up.

"Do tell us, Mr. Green," this young-old lady urged. "It sounds so romantic."

"It's funny you never mentioned it to any of us," put in the "Old Man" suspiciously.

Andy pulled himself up into a more decorous position, and turned his eyes towards his boss. "I never knew yuh took any interest in relic-hunting," he explained mildly.

"Sherwood says you found a skeleton!" said the young-old lady, shuddering pleasurably.

"Yes, I did find one—or part of one," Andy admitted reluctantly.

"What were the relics of pottery like?" demanded one of the cowboy-hatted girls, as if she meant to test him.

"I do some collecting of that sort of thing."

Andy threw away his cigarette, and with it all compunction. "Well, I wasn't so much interested in the dishes as in getting something to eat," he said. "I saw several different kinds. One was a big, awkward looking thing and was pretty heavy, and had straight sides. Then I come across one or two more that was ornamented some. One had what looked like a fish on it, and the other I couldn't make out very well. They didn't look to be worth much, none of 'em."

"Green," said his employer steadily, "*was* there such a place?"

Andy returned his look honestly. "There was, and there is yet, I guess," he said. "I'll tell you how you can find it and what it's like—if yuh doubt my word."

Andy glanced around and found every man, including the cook, listening intently. He picked a blade of new grass and began splitting it into tiny threads. The host found boxes for the women to sit upon, and the men sat down upon the grass.

"Before I come here to work, I was riding for the Circle C. One day I was riding away down in the Bad-lands alone and my horse slipped in some shale rock and went lame; strained his shoulder so I couldn't ride him. That put me afoot, and climbing up and down them hills I lost my bearings and didn't know where I was at for a day or two. I wandered around aimless, and got into ■ strip uh country that was new to me and plumb lonesome and wild.

"That second day is when I happened across this ruin. I was looking down into a deep, shut-in coulee, hunting water, when the sun come out and shone straight on to this place. It was right down under me; a stone ruin, with a tower on one end and kinda tumbled down so it wasn't so awful high—the tower wasn't. There was a-a——"

"Moat," Branciforte suggested.

"That's the word—a moat around it, and a bridge that was just about gone to pieces. It had loopholes,

like the pictures of castles, and a——"

"Battlement?" ventured one of the musical-comedy cowgirls.

Andy had not meant to say battlement; of a truth, his conception of battlements was extremely hazy, but he caught up the word and warmed to the subject. "Battlement? well I should guess yes! There was about as elegant a battlement as I'd want to see anywhere. It was sure a peach. It was——" he hesitated for a fraction of a second. "It was high as the tower, and it had figures carved all over it; them kind that looks like kid-drawing in school, with bows and arrows stuck out in front of 'em, threatening——"

"Not the old Greek!" exclaimed one of the girls.

"I couldn't say as to that," Andy made guarded reply. "I never made no special study of them things. But they was sure old."

"About how large was the castle?" put in the man who wrote things. "How many rooms, say?"

"I'd hate to give a guess at the size. I didn't step it off, and I'm a poor guesser. The rooms I didn't count. I only explored around in the main hall, like, a little. But it got dark early, down in there, and I didn't have no matches to waste. And next morning I started right out at sun-up to find the way home. No, I never counted the rooms. I don't reckon, though, that there was so awful many. Anyway, not more than fifteen or twenty. Ruins don't interest me much, though I was kinda surprised to run acrost that one, all right, and I'm willing to gamble there was warm and exciting times down there when the place was in running order."

"A castle away out here! Just think, good people, what that means! Romance, adventure and scientific discoveries! We must go and explore the place. Why can't we start at once—in the morning? This gentleman can guide us there."

"It ain't easy going," Andy remarked, conscientiously. "It's pretty rough; some place, you'd have to walk and lead your horses."

They swept aside the discouragement.

"We'd need pick and shovels, and men to dig," cried one enthusiast. "Uncle Peter can lend us some of his men. There may be treasure to unearth. There may be *anything* that is wonderful and mysterious. Uncle Peter, get your outfit together; you've boasted that a roundup can beat the army in getting under way quickly. Now let us have a practical demonstration. We want to start by six o'clock—all of us, with a cook and four or five men to do the excavating." It was the voice of the girl whom her friends spoke of as "The life of the party"—the voice of the-girl-who-does-things.

"It's sixty-five miles from here, good and strong—and mostly up and down," put in Andy.

"'Quoth the raven!'" mocked the-girl-who-does-things. "We are prepared to face the ups-and-downs. Do we start at six, Uncle Peter?"

Uncle Peter glanced sideways at the roundup boss. To bring it to pass, he would be obliged to impress the roundup cook and part of the crew. It was breaking an unwritten law of the range-land, and worse, it was doing something unbusinesslike and foolish. But not even the owner of the Rocking R may withstand the pleading of a pretty woman. Uncle Peter squirmed, but he promised.

"We start at six; earlier if you say so."

The roundup boss gave his employer a look of disgust and walked away. The crew took it that he went off to some secluded place to swear.

Thereafter there was much discussion of ways and means, and much enthusiasm among the visitors from the East, equalled by the depression of the crew, for cowboys do not, as a rule, take kindly to pick and shovel, and the excavators had not yet been chosen from among them. They were uneasy, and they stole frequent, betraying glances at one another.

All of which amused Pink much. Pink would like to have gone along, and would certainly have offered his services, but for the fact that his work there was done and he would have to start back to the Flying U just as soon

as one of his best saddle-horses, which had cut its foot, was able to travel. That would be in a few days, probably. So Pink sighed and watched the preparations enviously.

Since he was fairly committed into breaking all precedents, Uncle Peter plunged recklessly. He ordered the mess-wagon to be restocked and prepared for the trip, and he took the bed-tent and half the crew. The foreman he wisely left behind with the remnant of his outfit. They were all to eat at the house while the mess-wagon was away, and they were to spread their soogans—which is to say beds—where they might, if the bunk-houses proved too small or too hot.

The foreman, outraged beyond words, saddled at day-break and rode to the nearest town, and the unchosen half turned out in a body to watch the departure of the explorers, which speaks eloquently of their interest; for off duty cowboys are prone to sleep long.

Andy Green, as guide, bolted ahead of the party that he might open the gate. Bolted is a good word, for his horse swerved and kept on running, swerved again, and came down in a heap. Andy did not get up, and the women screamed. Then Pink and some others hurried out and bore Andy, groaning, to the bunk-house.

The visitors from the East gathered, perturbed, around the door, sympathetic and dismayed. It looked very much as if their exploration must end where it began, and the-girl-who-does-things looked about to weep, until Andy, still groaning, sent Pink out to comfort them.

"He says you needn't give up the trip on his account," Pink announced musically from the doorway. "He's drawing a map and marking the coulee where the ruin is. He says most any of the boys that know the country at all can find the place for yuh. And he isn't hurt permanent; he strained his back so he can't ride, is all." Pink dimpled at the young-old lady who was admiring him frankly, and withdrew.

Inside, Andy Green was making pencil marks and giving the chosen half explicit directions. At last he folded the paper and handed it to one called Sandy.

"That's the best I can do for yuh," Andy finished. "I don't see how yuh can miss it if yuh follow that map close. And if them gay females make any kick on the trail, you just remind 'em that I said all along it was rough going. So long, and good luck."

So with high-keyed, feminine laughter and much dust, passed the exploring party from the Rocking R.

"Say," Pink began two days later to Andy, who was sitting on the shady side of the bunk-house staring absently at the skyline. "There's a word uh praise I've been aiming to give yuh. I've seen riding, and I've done a trifle in that line myself and learned some uh the tricks. But I want to say I never did see a man flop his horse any neater than you done that morning. I'll bet there ain't another man in the outfit got next your play. I couldn't uh done it better myself. Where did you learn that? Ever ride in Wyoming?"

Andy turned his eyes, but not his head—which was a way he had—and regarded Pink slantwise for at least ten seconds.

"Yes, I've rode in Wyoming," he answered quietly. "What's the chance for a job, up your way? Is the Flying U open for good men and true?"

"It won't cost yuh ■ cent to try," Pink told him. "How's your back? Think you'll be able to ride by the time Skeeter is able to travel?"

Andy grinned. "Say," he confided suddenly, "if that hoss don't improve plumb speedy, I'll be riding on ahead. I reckon I'll be able to travel before them explorers get back, my friend."

"Why?" Pink asked boldly.

"Why? Well, the going is some rough, down that way. If they get them wagons half way to the coulee marked with a cross, they'll sure have to attach wings onto 'em. I've been kind of worried about that. I don't much believe Uncle Peter is going to enjoy that trip and he sure does get irritable by spells. I've got a notion to ride for some other outfit, this summer."

"Was that the reason you throwed your horse down

and got hurt?" asked Pink, and Andy grinned again by way of reply. "They'll be gone a week, best they can do," he estimated aloud. "We ought to be able to make our getaway by then, easy."

Pink assured him that a week would see them headed for the Flying U.

It was the evening of the sixth day, and the two were packed and ready to leave in the morning, when Andy broke off humming and gave a snort of dismay.

"By gracious, there they come. My mother lives in Buffalo, Pink, in a little drab house with white trimmings. Write and tell her how her son—Oh, beloved! but they're hitting her up lively. If they made the whole trip in that there frame uh mind, they could uh gone clean to Miles City and back. How pretty the birds sing! Pink, you'll hear words, directly."

Directly Pink did.

"You're the biggest liar on earth," Sherwood Branciforte contributed to the recriminating wave that near engulfed Andy Green. "You sent us down there on a wild-goose chase, you fool."

"I never sent nobody," Andy defended. "You was all crazy to go."

"And nothing but an old stone hut some trapper had built!" came an indignant, female tone. "There never was any castle, nor——"

"A man's home is his castle," argued Andy, standing unabashed before them. "Putting it that way, it was a castle, all right."

There was babel, out of which——

"And the skeleton! Oh, you—it was a dead cow!" This from the young-old lady, who was looking very draggled and not at all young.

"I don't call to mind ever saying it was human," put in Andy, looking at her with surprised, gray eyes.

"And the battlements!" groaned the - girl - who - does - things.

"You wanted battlements," Andy flung mildly into the uproar. "I always aim to please." With that he edged

away from them and made his escape to where the cook was profanely mixing biscuits for supper. All-day moves had put an edge to his temper. The cook growled an epithet, and Andy passed on. Down near the stable he met one of the chosen half, and the fellow greeted him with a grin. Andy stopped abruptly.

"Say, they don't seem none too agreeable," he said, jerking his thumb toward the buzzing group. "How about it, Sandy? Was they that petulant all the way?"

Sandy, the map-bearer, chuckled. "It's lucky you got hurt at the last minute! And yet it was worth the trip. Uh course we got stalled with the wagons the second day out, but them women was sure ambitious and made us go on with a packadero layout. I will say that, going down, they stood the hardships remarkable. It was coming back that frazzled the party.

"And when we found the place—say, but it was lucky you wasn't along! They sure went hog-wild when they seen the ruins. The old party who acts young displayed temper and shed tears uh rage. When she looked into the cabin and seen the remains uh that cow-critter, there was language it wasn't polite to overhear. She said ■ lot uh things about you, Andy. One thing they couldn't seem to get over, and that was the smallness uh the blamed shack. Them fourteen or fifteen rooms laid heavy on their minds."

"I didn't say there was fourteen or fifteen rooms. I said I didn't count the rooms; I didn't either. I never heard of anybody counting one room. Did you, Pink?"

"No," Pink agreed, "I never did!"

Sandy became suddenly convulsed. "Oh, but the funniest thing was the ancient pottery," he gasped, the tears standing in his eyes. "That old Dutch oven was bad enough; but when one uh the girls—that one who collects old dishes—happened across an old mackerel can and picked it up and saw the fish on the label, she was the maddest female person I ever saw in my life, bar none. If you'd been in reach about that time, she'd just about clawed your eyes out, Andy Green. Oh me, oh

my!" Sandy slapped his thigh and had another spasm.

Sounds indicated that the wave of recrimination was rolling nearer. Andy turned to find himself within arm's length of Uncle Peter.

"Maybe this is your idea of a practical joke, Green," he said to Andy. "But anyway, it will cost you your job. I ought to charge you up with the time my outfit has spent gallivanting around the country on the strength of your wild yarn. The quicker you hit the trail, the better it will suit me. By the way, what's your first name?" he asked, pulling out a check-book.

"Andy," answered the unrepentant one.

"Andy." Uncle Peter paused with a fountain pen between his fingers. He looked Andy up and down, and the frown left his face. He proceeded to write out the check, and when it was done he handed it over with a pleased smile. "What did you do it for, Green?" he asked in a friendlier tone.

"Self-defence," Andy told him laconically, and turned away.

Half an hour later, Andy and Pink trailed out of the coulee that sheltered the Rocking R. When they were out and away from the fence, and Pink's horses, knowing instinctively that they were homeward bound, were jogging straight west without need of guidance, Andy felt in his pocket for cigarette material. His fingers came in contact with the check Uncle Peter had given him, and he drew it forth and looked it over again.

"Well, by gracious!" he said. "Uncle Peter thinks we're even, I guess."

He handed the check to Pink, and rolled his cigarette; and Pink after one comprehending look at the slip of paper, doubled up over his saddle-horn and shouted with glee—for the check was written: "Pay to the order of Ananias Green."

"And I've got to sign myself a liar, or I don't collect no money," sighed Andy. "That's what I call tough luck, by gracious!"

The TWO-DAY DEPUTY

*Bill Hill, reckless young buckaroo,
packed dynamite in his Colt*

by
EUGENE CUNNINGHAM



BILL HILL came hurrying up Albion's main street toward Frazier's store. For three months he had been away—three months, during which he had ridden nearly fifteen hundred miles on horseback and another thousand by rail. Three months of delivering, of scouting, and of buying for that grim, shrewd, money-making old rancher, Hugh Hill, his own father. Most important of all, though, three months in which he had neither seen Dorinda Carson, nor heard one word from her.

He quickened his pace. His saddle-brown face was twisted in an anticipatory grin, his blue eyes were shining. "Dusty" Trayle of the Bar 33 had said that Dorinda had gone into Frazier's store, alone. Then Dusty had grinned when Bill Hill burned up the ground away from the wagon-yard. He and Bill were lifelong friends.

There was a stranger standing close to the steps, on

Frazier's gallery. He was an arrow-straight six-footer, wide-shouldered, lean-waisted, and wearing a new expensive black Knox hat pushed back on silky brown hair. A dark-eyed, handsome man, who twisted the points of his brown mustache thoughtfully and stared at Bill Hill as if looking through him. A regular dude, with a blue silk necktie, a pongee shirt, and silvery whipcord trousers pulled down over the legs of tan shop-made boots. At his heels, gold and silver-plated spurs glittered.

All in all, he made Bill Hill look like a range tramp by contrast, in his ancient and battered hat, his denim shirt, his faded blue overalls and run-over boots. But Bill had Dorinda too much in mind to give more than a passing glance to this cow-country fashion plate.

He put his foot on the squared cedar log that formed the step to the porch. At that moment, the tall man decided to descend to the street. There was really ample room for the two to pass, but now the stranger seemed not to see the stocky tow-headed young man.

So they cannoned into each other. As Bill Hill's pale brows drew down a little at what seemed rude intentional jostling, the tall dark man pivoted on his left heel. He whipped up a large brown fist. Squarely upon Bill Hill's mouth it landed.

In all his life, Bill had never been hit so hard. In fact, he had never dreamed that any man could hit so hard. Even though the blow landed on his mouth and not his chin, he could see—as if it were the edge of a black curtain unrolling—unconsciousness surging at him. He was rendered dizzy and sick by that terrific impact. Also he knew that his feet were flying up, as if they had wings on them and he was sailing through the air. He landed sitting down, on the sidewalk.

But he was a tough young man, well trained to falling, through the lifelong riding of salty horses. He fought back unconsciousness. The beginning of red rage was coming. That helped. Nevertheless, for all his willingness to get up, it was a long thirty seconds before he could scramble to his feet and rush at the tall dark man.

The stranger stood two yards away, watching him with a mocking little grin. He slid aside like a snake. Bill Hill whirled, landing one to the stomach and one to the breastbone. Then a second terrific right-hander knocked him down again.

This time he got up instantly. In he streaked. The tall man laid a hand on the back of his head and shoved downward. Bill's own momentum accomplished the rest.

He got up again. By the sheer fury of his charge, he plunged through that long-armed guard. He ripped away, with blows that hurt, propelled as they were by his heavy shoulders. But he had been shaken by his falls and the tall man was almost untouched. So it was not an even battle. There was a torrid exchange of wild swings; Bill Hill found himself flat on his back on the sidewalk. Something like galaxy stars floated around his head.

Then it was that he thought of his Colt, holstered so neatly under his left arm. Some instinct surged within him. It commanded him to haul the pistol out and fill this big sneering stranger full of holes. A counter-instinct fought the first. But it was hard not to yield to the temptation. For through that floating constellation came the tall man's smooth contemptuous voice:

"You don't like to hit a kid any harder than you have to."

Bill Hill came to his feet and stood shakily. If he needed any more incentive to fury, spectators furnished it. Quite a little crowd had gathered around—two or three men of the town and four or five cowboys, all of whom he knew well.

His good friend, Dusty Trayle, stood grinning at him. Frazier, the storekeeper, peered over the shoulder of old "Tuck" Carson, of the Half-Block-C, Dorinda's father. The terrifically tall gaunt Lon Nichols, sheriff of Albion County, was there, too. And of course, Dorinda Carson, small, dark, lovely, Bill Hill's object of worship since—well, he couldn't remember when he hadn't loved Dorinda.

"Reckon that'll have to end the perfawmance for to-

day," Sheriff Lon Nichols drawled. "Bill, better go over to my office and wash up. Coke, don't yuh hurrah him."

"Even for a sheriff, you stick out kind of far," the tall man, Coke, answered softly. "Now, don't you?"

"I am right high in the air." The sheriff nodded calmly. "I'm mebbe other things, too. I'm not pleased with you, Mr. Bart Coke. I happened to be standin' across the street when Bill, here, started to step onto the gallery. I seen yuh bump into him—accidentally on purpose, then hit him when he wasn't lookin'. I have got my own idees about lots of things."

Coke seemed on the verge of a remark but checked himself. It was sour Tuck Carson who did the talking.

"More likely 'twas the other way round. Not that I'm doubtin' yuh believe it was like yuh said," he added hurriedly. "But Bill Hill, he was always a young hellion. Prankin' around, fussin' with somebody all the time. He fell out with his pa, old Hugh, just today. His pa told me about it when we stopped at the Bar-H on the way to town."

The sheriff looked at Bill Hill, and jerked his head slightly, indicating the one-story calaboose and sheriff's office across the street. . . .

When Bill had washed his swollen bloody face, the sheriff drew his long legs up and hooked his heels in a rung of the chair. He stared at Bill.

"I was watchin' Bart Coke," he drawled. "Watchin' Bill Hill, too, wonderin' if yuh aimed to go for that hide-out under yore arm. If yuh had jerked that gun and killed Coke, I might have had a job o' hangin' to do."

"I certainly felt like killin'," Bill admitted grimly. "That coyote bumped into me a-purpose, then hit me before I even guessed what was comin'. I hadn't paid much attention to him, because I didn't know him, and because, well——"

"Because yuh was thinkin' about Dorinda Carson," the sheriff put in. "Probably Bart Coke was thinkin' about Dorinda, too. Lots of things happened in the three months you been away, Bill. Bart Coke has got to be a

part o' this here community. He's a mighty steady eater of Dorinda's cookin'. Yuh got to admit he's pretty much a eyeful to a girl. And what are you, Bill? Nothin' but a wild harum-scarum cowboy. Yuh don't show up for much against Bart Coke. I tell yuh this, and I ain't fond of Coke."

"I'm twenty-three," Bill Hill said sullenly. "Tuck Carson said I was fussin' with pa today. I had a right to. I'm a top hand. I took a solid train load o' steers to Fort Worth, didn't I? I bought stuff all over the Pecos country for him, an' when I come back, what does he tell me? That Johnny Ford is foreman of the Runnin'-M. An' me figurin' that when he bought the Runnin'-M, he'd give me a job as foreman an' a—a chance to——"

"A chance to marry Dorinda," the sheriff finished. "Johnny Ford ain't no older'n yuh are, Bill, but he's got a mighty old head on him. Yuh've always been harum-scarum. Now yuh're out of a job, ain't yuh?"

Bill Hill was picturing Dorinda Carson smiling up at the tall dark good-looking Bart Coke. Glumly he nodded.

"I can use another dep'ty. Now I ain't hirin' yuh for no swaggerin' two-gun fighter. Me an' Jim Spreen an' Colorado Helm will take care o' the fightin'. What I want yuh for, mostly, is to tend store while we're gone, and take care o' some o' the tax collectin'. I have got plenty to do.

"We had two train robberies about six weeks apart, while you was gone. Since then, I have been workin' with the railroad detectives an' the rangers an' the U.S. marshals, tryin' to put the loop over the four men that done the job. That means lots o' ridin'. If yuh want to be sworn in as a office-holdin', tax-collectin' dep'ty, forty a month an' hoss feed, stick up yore paw."

Bill Hill held up his right hand and took his oath. After all, he would get to wear a deputy's star.

"Now," grunted the sheriff, "yuh start out tomorrow mornin' for Jasper an' finish the tax collectin' I had to stop doing after the last robbery."

An hour later, Bill Hill was back at Frazier's store. This time he wore upon the breast of his old blue shirt a nickeled shield, with the magic words DEPUTY SHERIFF. His long-barreled .44 Colt sagged low on his right thigh. He went into the store. There was no sign, now, of Bart Coke. But at the dry-goods counter in the rear of the store, stood a slim shapely figure in a stiffly starched blue linen dress.

Dorinda Carson turned as if surprised when Bill Hill stopped beside her. When her dark eyes came to the bruised face of the new deputy, Bill saw her bite her lip to keep from smiling. Then she saw the badge on his shirt, and stiffened.

"Why-why, I didn't know you were a deputy." The covert smile vanished. There was something new in her expression. It was respect.

"It ain't so much of a deputy's job," Bill Hill confessed. "Lon Nichols had to have somebody collect taxes. Him an' Colorado Helm an' Jim Spreen are chasin' train robbers. Anybody might have knowed it wouldn't be long till somebody took advantage o' the way the train crawls up Castro Hill. All a man would have to do is stand at the top o' the hill an' swing onto the engine."

He didn't tell her how fascinating that idea had been to him more than once, raised, as he had been, on tales of Sam Bass and Jesse James and the Dalton Boys. Many a time Bill Hill and Dusty Trayle had stopped their horses to stare at a train puffing slowly up the long grade of Castro Hill. They had pictured themselves as hell-rolling train robbers. Then they had outgrown these notions, he and Dusty.

"I'll be passin' yo' way, tax collectin', tomorrow," he said softly to Dorinda.

"Pa will be glad to see you," she said demurely.

"I'm not interested in how yore pa will feel about it. What I want to know is, how will you feel?"

"Why, I won't mind," she told him absently.

"Won't mind?" he said bitterly. "Is that all yuh got to say, Dorinda? I can remember when yuh was glad to see

me. Now I been out o' the country three months, an' I come back an'—yuh won't mind if yuh see me. Is that the way yuh feel?"

She gave a sidelong glance at his angry face, then looked down again. Her lips curved, but he could not see that.

"You're a sweet boy, Bill. I've always liked you."

"Boy? Liked?" he repeated savagely. "Dorinda, yuh know I'm crazy about yuh. But now—now this fella, Coke, that nobody knows anything about, who may be any kind o' scalawag——"

"Pull in your horns, Bill Hill!" she stopped him coolly. "Pa has known Mr. Coke's people at Menardsville for thirty years. Bart is a fine man. He came here from Amarillo and hunted pa up, to find out about property in this country.

"So he put up with us for nearly three months, until he bought the old Harvey place. Most of his stockers he bought from us. Don't say anything about him, Bill. Just because he wears good clothes——"

It seemed to Bill that she looked with meaning at his own shabby range garb.

"Some people in this country thought he was a soft spot to fall on. They found out different. Those people over around Menardsville, I've always heard, are pretty good men."

With which pointed remark she turned away. Bill stood hesitantly. Inwardly he was boiling. Before he had left on his long errand for his father, Dorinda Carson had looked upon him with more favor than anyone else in Albion county. Now you might think, from the way Dorinda acted, that he was a casual acquaintance.

He stalked out angrily.

Thus it happened that Dusty Trayle's road, next morning, was Bill Hill's road as far as Cottonwood Siding. They pulled in their horses to stare at the loading corrals and the gleaming rails that pointed north toward Castro Hill.

"Wouldn't you like to get a grip on them robbers?"

Dusty said softly. "There's over two thousand dollars reward for the gang, now. It's the same four strangers who've been stickin' up trains all over Johnson county."

"Strangers?" Bill Hill repeated, staring hard at his friend. "Did anybody come into the county with Coke? He looks to me like a fella who wouldn't think no more about stickin' up a train than I would about killin' a fly."

"Yeh, I thought about that, too." Dusty Trayle nodded sardonically. "Yuh see, I don't like him a bit better'n yuh do. So I wrote a letter to Tony Mullins at Amarillo, and also a letter to the sheriff of Menard county. Tony answered that Coke had been a salty deputy marshal at Amarillo an' that he come there from Menardsville, where he'd been a deputy sheriff."

"Tony says—an' the letter from the sheriff at Menardsville backed it up—that the Coke family was well-knowned an' highly respected. Yuh see, Bill, there was always four robbers, accordin' to the passengers. Four men, all about the same size, but two light-headed and two dark-headed. Now Coke has been in this county ever since right after our first robbery. An' there's no three men in this county, to fit in with him an' make the other three robbers."

Dusty was bound for the Walking-H. He turned off, and Bill Hill went on along the railroad to Jasper. When he arrived in that small settlement, Bill took up the tax work where the sheriff had left off three weeks before. By mid-afternoon it was finished.

He saddled up, ready to go back to the county seat. Just then the station agent's son appeared with a telegram from Sheriff Lon Nichols.

OUR TRAIN ROBBERS CAUGHT CLEBURNE. IDENTIFIED BY CONDUCTOR. AM GOING CLEBURNE NOW WITH SPREEN AND HELM. COME BACK QUICK AS YOU CAN.

This put a crimp in those suspicions which, despite Dusty Trayle, Bill Hill had retained about Bart Coke.

On the southern edge of the settlement, he was halted by a hard-riding Mexican cowboy named Morales, from

Hackberry Lane's Open-A L. Morales, seeing the shield on Bill Hill's shirt, poured forth a torrent of Spanish. Four mean-looking men had stolen the four best horses on the ranch. Mrs. Lane had sent him into Jasper to get somebody to trail the thieves immediately.

Bill considered the matter. He had not a high opinion of the men in Jasper at that moment. He felt that they wouldn't be much help if it came to an encounter with the thieves. So he made his decision quickly.

"Let's go back," he told the cowboy.

He got the story of the robbery as they loped toward the Open-A L. Morales, riding from the house to the horse pasture, had seen four men cutting out horses from the herd. He had but a momentary glimpse of them, for a man on a large bay horse had proceeded to make medicine with a rifle in Morales' direction.

"And I," Morales said solemnly, "had no desire to become a dead hero. I rode away from there. The air was full of bullets."

They had ridden seven or eight miles toward the ranch, when suddenly Morales pulled in his horse and pointed to the ground.

"Our horses!" he announced. "That is the boss' favorite gelding. See that broken shoe?"

Bill Hill sat scowling in the direction toward which that trail seemed to point. Straight toward the railroad at Castro Hill—the place where, three weeks before, a train robbery had been staged.

Four men. There had always been four robbers. Then he remembered the telegram from the sheriff, reporting those four robbers now under lock and key in Cleburne. But at any rate, four horse thieves mounted on four of the best horses in that section of the country, were heading toward Castro Hill. That might be nothing more than coincidence.

"Willin' to trail with me?" he demanded of Morales. The Mexican nodded.

The trail of the stolen horses led them into a rocky brushy country, as the sun dropped nearer the horizon.

Their faces and bodies were whipped by small branches of trees and bushes. They scrambled down into dry, boulder-studded arroyos. As they rode with darkness coming on, it came to Bill Hill that over toward the center of this rock country was the old Biggars stock pen. In another hour it was going to be impossible to see that faint trail.

A Winchester barrel came out from behind a boulder.

"Keep right on travelin', you fellows!" a calm voice commanded them. "This is a awful unhealthy country!"

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Bill Hill, where an older and wiser man would have ridden straight on.

"I'm the man who owns this Winchester," the voice replied in the same even tone. "Now git."

There was nothing else to do. Anyhow, the trail they followed went on past this spot. Bill Hill and Morales rode on. For two miles they went. Dusk was not far off, now. Still, faint hoof prints could be seen now and then. Always Morales claimed that he could see the broken shoe of his boss' pet horse.

They were riding pretty fast, believing speed to be more important than quiet. Anyway, Bill Hill thought, they were too far behind the thieves to make caution necessary. So it was that, riding around a thick clump of chaparral, they were surprised by rifle fire.

Not forty yards away, puffs of smoke rose against the gray of the darkening sky above the chaparral. Lead came whining like spiteful wasps around their ears. They whirled their horses, jumping them back behind cover. Bill Hill snatched his carbine from the saddle scabbard, and dropped off his big sorrel.

Back he ran, crouching low. He saw a branch move and drove two swift shots into the chaparral at that point. A man toppled forward out of the low branches.

Morales' big 45-90 roared, and behind that leafy screen somebody yelled furiously. Then came the sound of horses galloping away. Morales and Bill Hill jumped onto their own mounts again and raced across the tiny clearing to see the results of their shooting.

The man whom Bill Hill had killed was big, brown-

faced, and tow-headed. He had a heavy stubble of reddish beard. He wore two pistols, and on the ground where his horse had stood was a .44 Winchester.

But there were no horses to be seen. A crackling toward the north told where one horse, at least, was running off. Morales carefully examined the tracks. He straightened with a grim nod.

"Our men—our horses," he said to Bill.

"Our train robbers," Bill Hill answered. The dead man's shirt front was crammed with registered mail, envelopes, and packages. "Let's go after them!" he added.

Morales unbuckled the robber's gun belts and buckled them around his own waist. He also took the dead man's Winchester. Then they went on.

They emerged into the glade where the old Biggars stock pen lay. From behind the pole walls of the half-ruined corral came rifle fire again. Bill Hill's sorrel went crashing down, stone dead.

He was catapulted out of the saddle into a bunch of chaparral, followed by hissing lead. He had clung mechanically to his carbine. The spot where he lay was excellent for raking the old corral with a short-distance carbine fire.

He settled himself comfortably and looked for something to shoot at. Morales had vanished. But after a moment, he revealed his whereabouts with fire from the heavy rifle. It was perhaps forty yards from where Bill Hill lay behind the chaparral on the crest of a narrow deep little gully to the stock pen.

Bill's mouth tightened grimly. Not for anything would he have had any one else with him. He wanted the rest of these train robbers all in his own bag. He wondered if they had their horses in the pen with them. In the growing dusk it was impossible to see. So he picked out a crack that showed as a dark streak between two logs, and concentrated upon it for three shots. This drew the combined fire of all the robbers, and he blazed away cheerfully in reply. Morales got busy on the far side of the old pen.

Dark came. But the full moon was high and the little glade was flooded with light. There was no cover between where he lay and the pen. Time passed. Occasionally, there would be a few shots.

Bill saw something dark moving from the far corner of the pen toward the surrounding brush. He sent half a dozen bullets at it. A man jumped up with a wild yell. He took three running steps, then fell flat and was still.

Morales whanged away. Inside the pen one man replied to the Mexican. Then both stopped firing suddenly. Again there was a period of waiting. At last Bill Hill moved behind the sheltering brush. Instantly a rattle of carbine fire came from the pen and bullets clipped leaves and twigs off all around him. He moved backward, and a bullet struck him on the head. He knew no more.

When he came to his senses, his head was splitting and he was dizzy. He had fallen from the edge of the bank into a narrow gully. It seemed ages before he could sit up and move. His carbine had fallen almost at his feet. His pistol had dropped from the holster close by. He picked up both and scrambled upward.

He was very weak. The bullet had torn a great gash in his scalp, and he had bled freely during his unconsciousness. That must have been a long time, for it was almost dawn now. As he bound up his head, he wondered what had become of Morales. He had a good view of the stock pen. It was empty.

There was blood on the ground inside, but he found no other trace of human occupancy. Out in the brush behind it, he found where horses had been tied and where their departing tracks had scattered.

Scouting around, he presently came upon Morales' horse, with saddle reins wrapped around a foreleg. Finally he found Morales, lying at the edge of the little clearing. He had been shot through the head.

The nearest ranch was that now belonging to Bart Coke, with the Carsons' just beyond it.

"Well, I certainly have had an interestin' evenin',"

Bill drawled to himself. "Reckon I better take the saddle-bags off Major an' head for Carson's."

But at the first sight of his dead horse, he turned cold all over. The saddle-bags, containing better than six hundred dollars of the county's money and the registered mail taken from the dead robber, had been removed from his saddle.

Abruptly, from feeling about seven feet high, Bill Hill felt as if he were about seven years old. He began to wonder if he had been such a heroic peace officer, anyhow. He had a guilty feeling that this could never have happened to Sheriff Lon Nichols or his two experienced deputies. He rode back to where he had killed the first robber. The body was gone!

"The Hard Luck Kid—that's what they'll call me," he told himself mournfully. "If they don't call me things a heap worse!"

He rode steadily until he saw the Coke house in its little hollow beside the Albion road. He yelled and battered on the door without rousing anybody. As he turned to the road again, he saw three horses coming up the road from Carson's. A tall rider suddenly jumped out ahead of the others and came racing.

It was Bart Coke. Old Tuck Carson and Dorinda were only a jump behind him when he reached the wire gate. They all reined in to stare at the haggard, dusty, and stubble-faced deputy. "Well," drawled Coke with an unpleasant grin, "you mustn't ride hawses, sonny, till you git yore growth an' can stay on 'em."

"What happened to you, Billy?" cried Dorinda, turning white. She spurred alongside Bill. "Did you—have a fall?"

"Considerable tumble—mostly in my own esteem," Bill confessed grimly. "S'pose yuh know the train got stuck up ag'in, on Castro Hill?"

"Never heard a word about it!" Tuck Carson exclaimed, gaping. "Yuh shore, Bill? Less'n they cut the telegraph wires, looks like we'd ought to got some word."

"Well, I run into the robbers before sundown yester-

day, an' killed one. An' me an' that Mex, Morales—a mighty good man, he was—fought 'em till they downed Morales at the old Biggar stock pen an' creased me. I woke up in a gully, an' everybody was gone."

"You didn't—dream up this tale?" Bart Coke suggested. "Come on inside, Mr. Carson, Dorinda. Set down on the gallery. Funny we never heard about all this."

"It may be funny to yuh," Bill Hill said between his teeth, "but it don't make me grin. I had better than six hundred dollars of tax money in my saddle pockets. While they had me cold, they took the pockets off the saddle an' high-tailed, packin' the money."

"Six hund'ed of tax money!" Tuck and Coke echoed. They stared at Bill, then turned to look at each other. Bill knew what that significant glance meant. He knew that there would be others to think the same thing. "Fake! He took the money himself."

"Billy, Billy," Dorinda cried, "you're white as paper! Have you had anything to eat? I'll make coffee."

"Nothin' since yesterday noon. I'm not hungry."

She motioned angrily to Bart, and he handed over his key. Bill trailed into the little house. They went past ■ tousled bed, at the foot of which was ■ pile of tumbled blankets, and into the kitchen. Carson and Coke stayed outside—to talk over his story, he knew. Dorinda sniffed in disgust at the dirty dishes on the table, at the empty water bucket, and the grounds-smeared coffee pot. As she snatched up the bucket and went out the back door, Bill reached for kindling. He poked the ashes in the fire box with ■ stick, and found bits of charred paper. He raked them to the center of the grate. One crumpled ball was large enough to fire his kindling. He picked it up to shake off the ashes and——

"Git away from that! What you tryin' to do?"

Bart Coke stood in the door of the front room, glaring suspiciously at Bill. His hand was on a pistol butt.

"I'm makin' a fire. Yuh got any objections?"

For answer, Bart Coke snapped the pistol from the holster with ■ smooth speed that reminded Bill of Coke's

service as "a salty deputy marshal" of Abilene. With the muzzle, he gestured Bill away from the stove. Bill backed off, frowning bewilderedly. Then it came to him. Coke figured he was trying to dispose of something connected with that tax money. He laughed harshly.

"Yuh'll be plumb disappointed. That ain't mine."

Coke picked up the wad of paper with his left hand and stood looking at it. He glared again at Bill, who could not suppress a grin. And then Coke scratched a match with his left hand, having dropped the paper back in the stove. He was going to burn that paper. Why?

"Drop it!" Bill Hill snarled at him, leaning fiercely forward. "What yuh aimin' to get rid of? What——"

The pistol muzzle jumped a little. Coke's face was fairly demoniac. Bill moved mechanically, but with the smooth expertness of much practice. It was part of the gunplay he and Dusty had mastered as kids. He flung himself to the side, and Coke's bullet sang past him. As Bill landed on left elbow, his gun was out and blazing.

He missed the first shot but sent three slugs into Bart Coke, while from the back door Dorinda Carson screamed Coke's name in a thin agonized tone of warning. Bill yelled at Coke to drop the gun. With teeth snarling between thin lips, Coke tried to lift his pistol for a final shot. Bill drove his last bullet squarely into Coke's face. Up Bill came, as Coke went face-downward to the floor. Bill staggered to the stove, and with shaking fingers, grabbed the paper and unrolled it. The lines of writing blurred, then cleared.

"My tax-collection sheet!" he yelled. "'Twas Coke stole my saddle-bags. So that's why he had so many blankets in there. So many dirty dishes—Coke had his friends here. They sneaked out, stole them four Open-A L hosses, stuck up the train, fought us!"

Then, for the first time in his life, he fainted. When he came to, Sheriff Lon Nichols was grinning down at him. Jim Spreen and Colorado Helm were there, along with several Albion men.

"Wrong men at Cleburne," Nichols grinned. "Train

robbers, all right, but not ours. I got the telegram on the train, an' we got back just in time to lead the posse. Found Morales. An' we found three dead men, all hard cases with long records, hid in ■ cave with their saddles an' guns. Coke'd put 'em there. They left their own hosses in the chaparral, yuh see; aimed to use them hosses o' Hackberry Lane's, then turn 'em loose an' ride back on their own hosses. You downed three of the gang. We dug up yore tax money an' the registered mail, an' stuff out o' the express car, in Coke's corral. Yuh got reward money comin', Bill."

"He's got a foreman's job comin', too," drawled Hugh Hill, Bill's grim-faced father. "I bought the Triangle Bench finally, yesterday, son. Yuh want to run it? Hund'ed a month an' house?"

Bill got up. It had been too much and too fast for him. Suddenly, though, he remembered Dorinda, and none of this meant anything to him. As the men turned to stare again at the piled stuff dug up in the corral, he lurched out numbly to the front gallery. He sat down on the edge and buried his face in his arms, leaning upon his knees.

"Billy! Billy!" a soft voice came to him.

A round young arm went swiftly about his neck as Dorinda slipped down beside him. She drew his head over upon her shoulder, but he pulled away.

"I'm sorry—I had to down him. I-I reckon I never guessed how much yuh-yuh loved him, till yuh yelled to warn him."

"Warn him? Why-why, I was begging him not to shoot you! I never loved him. Not him. He was big and good-looking, and he knew how to talk to a girl. So much older and—more settled than you, Billy. I liked him. But when I saw him—trying to kill you-you——"

She dropped her head against him. He drew her close and held her until she put both hands upon his beard-stubbed, dirty face. She pulled it down to hers.

"I—your pa told me about the Triangle Bench," she told him, when her mouth was free again for talking. "I—I always liked that house. Now I'll love it."

CROSSING the GORGE

*Anyhow, he's a good boy
and God loves him*

by JACKSON
GREGORY



UP AND down across a hundred square miles of the Sierra Nevada at its wildest, the boy was known and mildly loved as Crazy Barnaby. Christened something altogether different, he had been dubbed anew by an old miner who read Charles Dickens. He was seventeen; he was as wild and weird as Barnaby Rudge, merely lacking a raven; he listened to voices. He said that God came down and talked with him. So they called him Crazy Barnaby: since why should God, with an entree into all circles, talk with him?

Crazy Barnaby made long lonely excursions throughout the wilderness country. He said sometimes that a sparrow had been caught by one wing in a distant manzanita thicket and that he must hurry to set the bird free. He said sometimes that a deer had broken its slender foreleg and would perish unless he went to its succor. He said that the little mountain-meadow rabbits and the lean timber wolves and the striped chipmunks and the eagles were his brothers.

And where Crazy Barnaby went, always with a packet of food and water and a flask and iodine and adhesive tape at his belt, there went also a softly merry jingle of

bells. He carried a staff, and to it were affixed three small bells which, he said, talked for him, saying the things he could almost think of but could never quite get words for.

So "Crazy" they called him. All except Father Kilduff. This Father Kilduff was a young Irish priest, as strong ■■■ bull and seventeen times as fearless.

"Crazy? I'm not so sure," he said thoughtfully. "Anyhow, he's a good boy and God loves him."

A wintry October dusk shut down over the mountains. In the bleak depths of the gorge it was already dark, while shafts of light splintered on the crags a thousand feet above. Today was clear after three days of down-pour, but the smell of the coming snowstorm was in the crisp air. The torrent which raged through the steep-walled canyon was as mad a thing now as runaway horses, manes flying. To attempt to cross it here was to wrap death's cold arms about you.

Yet a man was making his way down into the gorge. For he was lost, he was starving, he was pinched with cold—and he had seen that gayest of all sights, a light. There were red and orange flames, the merry banners of a campfire toward which he made all haste, breaking through patches of buckbrush, tearing his hands on granite spurs, and never feeling a scratch.

It was all inky blackness in the bottom of the gorge when he got down to the river's edge, the last light having fled from the heights. Even the campfire was hidden behind some obstruction. He stopped, deafened by the thunder of raging water. His heart, lifted so high, sank. For now he knew that the fire was on the far side of the stream, just beyond ■■ waterside thicket of red willows. Peering, he at last saw a faint masked flicker of it.

He knew that he could not cross. Yet, for companionship, he shouted.

Then he saw a moving light. Someone was carrying a flaring torch, a piece of dry pitchy pine from the fire. He shouted again, and the torch waved, was lifted high, and like a faint cry from some far-off elfin land came an

answer. It was in a woman's voice—a girl's—and some of the words, not drowned by the water voices, were: "Where? . . . Who? . . . Thank God!"

He came closer, standing so that his boots were in the water. She too must have drawn closer to him. He could not see her at all clearly, but could make out a slender wavering form.

They called back and forth to each other. He risked much in clambering to a big slippery rock in the stream. They were but a few feet apart. He could make out that she was on a tiny sand bar, a place of pebbles. This was what they called Thunder Canyon, and with reason—a place of sonorous reverberations, of mighty tumult, with waterfalls and whirlpool.

Still, certain of his words carried to her—"lost," "hungry," "starving"—elemental words.

"Wait!" He made out that as she whirled and ran back to her fire. She returned, called to him again, made him understand by showing him in the light of her torch what she was holding—and hurled it toward him. Something to eat! Being a girl, she threw as girls mostly do, and her little present to him went where she did not intend it to go at all, and fell short and splashed and was carried away.

Both saw. He was speechless. She screamed. Then he laughed. She'd do better next time; he'd instruct her. But what words reached him in her wailing voice wiped the laugh out of him. She too was hungry. Nonetheless, not quite starving, she had thrown him the last bite she had—a morsel she was saving for supper just before she curled up to die or to go to sleep.

He had matches, and so built a fire as close as he could to the edge of the stream. She brought firebrands and soon had her own fire going as close as she could manage on her side of Thunder Canyon. They stood in the wind-blown light, and showed themselves to each other, all by way of being companionable. He could see a slight, gracefully moving figure. Of her face he could see nothing, but he knew how beautiful it must be. She could see

a man tall and slim despite his heavy coat. But of his face she could make nothing, of it she could guess nothing, except what his voice had made her think of: a keen, frank, and purposeful face—a young face.

"Talking's all out," he volleyed at her, cupping his hands at his mouth. "Tomorrow morning we'll work upstream—we'll find a ford. We'll be all right then."

And she said something, and after a while they settled down by their fires and called good night, and tried to sleep. But they kept their fires going all night.

Far off he heard a timber wolf howl. So too did she. The wolf was on her side of the canyon, and she sprang to her feet and snatched up a firebrand—and then crouched down again, hiding. He thundered his reassurances at her; he tried to say that if any old wolf came along tonight they'd eat him. She tried to laugh back at him. The wolf went away, and the two lived through the night somehow.

"We'll see each other in the morning, anyhow," was what both were thinking.

But these two who in the night time were only black blurs to each other were scarcely better than gray blurs in the dawn. The wind sharpened and stiffened. It shrilled down along the canyon bearing fine hard grains of snow. When a pallid sun came up, they could not see it, so lowering were the skies. The ground was white all about them; snow was on his hat, on his coat; it hooded her hair and clung to her like a mantle of ermine.

"You look great in your winter furs!" was his greeting. And she must have caught some of the words, because there came back to him, "Santa Claus!"

They agreed to work upstream. They'd hope to come to a narrowing of the channel, a place to cross; this hoped-for junction of their spent forces was the one urgent affair in life.

They waved valiantly across the stream and began ■ toilsome journey which was to last interminable hours. At times they lost each other entirely, hidden by willow thickets, by boulders. And these were times when each

feared a little, and which always ended by one or the other standing out upon a high place until at last the other came in sight. Then they called back and forth cheerily and continued again.

Once, in a spot where the water ran somewhat less thunderously, he called to her, trying to be gay about things:

"How do you know I'm not a cannibal? I'm hungry enough to eat you!"

She laughed at that; shaky laughter. She was so weary, so hungry, so drearily cold that the two big tears on her cheeks were hard pearls.

"Frozen tears," she thought, "but our hearts are warm. And after a while I won't be all alone like this."

They toiled on in an endless inferno of wind and snow and slippery rocks and roaring water, always with the hope, like a star ahead, that soon they'd come together. How tremendously important that imminent meeting became! As though it were going to warm them, to feed them, to lift them out of all this!

At last, after fighting laborious ways along canyon walls, at times far apart, at times quite near, they came to a narrowing of the canyon where there was a huge flat-topped rock to which he might leap. From this, in turn, he could jump across a wild millrace and land among pebbles on her side. She watched him, her two hands hard against her breast.

He made the first half of the journey, balanced uncertainly, steadied himself, waved his soggy battered old hat, took off for the final lap—and crumpled on the shore.

She ran toward him. She fell, and he caught her—and both went down together. And where they fell they lay a moment, he still holding her tightly against him—and laughed just because they were so young, and because they couldn't have helped it to save their souls. . . .

He got to his feet and helped her up, and they stood facing each other, his hands clasping both of hers. She was a little thing and had to look up at him. Her eyes

were glad now. There were soft curls about her delicate ears, and her mouth was soft, too, with her smile.

"You're lovely," he said.

"So're you." She laughed up at him; for through his fine eyes she had looked deep into the man himself.

"We're both lost, it appears—" he began.

"I came from the Sierra Dude Ranch."

"Lord! That must be twenty miles from here!"

"I should think a thousand miles would be a closer guess. And I am Penny."

"No! Penelope?"

"Uh-uh. And—"

"Lovely name! And I'm John Gray." He made a wry face. "Funny, isn't it? I was raised in this country, too, but have been away since I was a kid. Came back; tried to take a short cut; got mixed on landmarks—and here we are."

"I'm glad you did get lost," she said fervently. "I couldn't have stood it much longer."

"Will some one be looking for you?"

"I suppose so. But you see, I did want to be all alone; it was my last week here. So I made them think I was going one way, then came the other. They'll be looking for me about forty miles from here."

"Can you sing?"

"Will that help? I've heard of whistling."

"Strike up Onward, Christian Soldiers! We're on our way somewhere."

She thought, "How strong his hands are."

He said abruptly, "Do you know who the two best friends in the world are?"

And she answered him simply, "Of course I know; we are."

And then he let her hands go and said, "Forward, then!"

They decided to keep on upstream, as he, by this time, had his bearings and thought that they stood a better chance if they struck out for the tiny settlement in High Indian Valley. If they missed that, there were still the

Black Rock Mines; and there used to be a couple of cabins which he knew years ago, old prospectors' places. . . .

After their initial spurt of gaiety they were silent. They had climbed up out of the canyon, seeking the upper ridges, and save for a suddenly muted music of wind-blown pines there was scarcely a sound. The snow fell heavy and thick, settling on pine and fir boughs, bending them and holding them still. The cold was not so piercing now. As they labored on, weaving in and out among the big trees upon an upland plateau, they grew comfortably warm.

But they were fast growing very, very weak, and there was nothing at hand more edible than harsh brush and pine needles. And both thought of her last sandwich—how it had splashed in the stream.

They stopped often to rest. He leaned against a thick-boled pine; she stood close to him; gently he drew her closer, into his arms, sheltering her.

"I suppose," she said faintly, "that we're done for? I can't go on much farther. Can you?"

She didn't seem afraid; just weary.

"No, I can't stick it out much longer," he said. "We'll keep on as long as we can. In the end we can freeze and starve together."

She stirred ever so slightly in his comforting arms. "At least we won't be alone; that 'together' helps, doesn't it?"

He said fervently, "God bless you, Penelope."

And she squeezed his hand and said, "And you too, John."

Then he kissed her, and her lips grew warm under his.

"Penelope!" he almost shouted at her after that kiss, as though she were across the gorge from him again. "You listen to me! We're going to win clear of this with bells on!"

His eyes flashed, and hers, uplifted to his, flashed back with the same look. They did not want to die, even in each other's arms. So they summoned up new strength

and toiled on, their hands locked together; and where she faltered he helped her, and when once or twice he stumbled she helped him.

They hit a trail not altogether hidden under snow, for the trees were a dark roof above it; and the trail climbed another ridge and found another meadow and of a sudden became a sort of rutted road; and the road led on to a crazy bridge of poles across a creek. And in a clearing only a couple of hundred yards away they saw the most beautiful sight in the world—a log cabin with a rock chimney and a gray smudge of smoke!

They stood stone-still and looked at it, like two lost souls who at last glimpsed paradise and knew that they might enter—yet who for a breathless moment must pause and prepare themselves, purifying their souls with thanksgiving.

It was natural for him to hold her in the crook of his arm. She trembled so, shaken with cold, with weariness and hunger-faintness, and with the impact of sudden hope. He could not see her eyes just then, but fell to marveling at the mysterious fringes of her curly eyelashes. Then she looked up at him and they clutched each other and, hand in hand, hurried on.

“Do you like your bacon nice and crisp?” he wanted to know.

“I’ll make the batter for hot cakes. Just flour and tinned milk and—”

“We’ll fry ’em in ham fat. And then some dried-apple sauce—”

“I’ll do that while you’re ripping cans open. Some peaches, please, John; and sardines and tomatoes and corn and sweet potatoes and pineapple and—”

“Didn’t you think you saw smoke coming out of the chimney?”

“I thought I did. Still, we couldn’t have seen any smoke in all this snow, could we?”

“Anyhow, there’s none now. But even if the place is deserted—”

He struck the door, called sharply, and then lifted

the old-fashioned latch. The door was not locked. They stepped immediately out of the storm into a warm semi-dark room, the atmosphere heavily pungent with wood smoke. There had been a fire here just now; in the small rock fireplace there were still glowing coals in the gray-ash heap. But the place seemed unoccupied.

The windows, two of them, were small; a barley sack hung over one, curtainwise. Only a dim light held here. In that light they saw ■ bunk, ■ table, a bench, and—finally—a man lying motionless on the floor halfway between fireplace and bunk.

John Gray went hastily forward, while Penelope stood in the middle of the room, her eyes wide with ■ dawning horror, her fingers hushing her lips.

"Dead," said John. He was kneeling. He looked back at her. "He must have died only a few minutes ago; he's hardly cold yet."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded glumly. "Somebody killed him, poor devil. He's been shot or stabbed in the chest; he's got a bandage tied about him."

She slumped down right where she was, on the bare floor, and put her face into her trembling hands, and he heard her begin to sob. He said to himself, "Fool that I am, to hand it to her like that!"

He rose to go to her. Instead he stooped, gathered up the dead man in his arms, and carried him swiftly through a half-open door into the cabin's only other room, ■ dark small place with a bench in it, empty crates, picks and shovels, the general clutter of a storeroom. There were no windows here. When he had put down his burden, he closed the door after him.

"Penelope."

She didn't answer. She had crawled near the warm hearth and lay there face down, her forehead upon her crossed arms, her wet curly hair glinting ever so softly in the faint fire glow.

He stooped and put his cheek against hers. Both cheeks were so cold!

"In one minute," he said gently, "we'll have ■ big blaze going. Then hot coffee, and—and we'll be ready to handle whatever is in the cards."

In the chimney corner was a tall stack of dry wood. He broke some splinters off and crisscrossed them on the coals; he blew on them and so ignited them; he began heaping the rich pine wood high. Flames leaped out and up, licking the resinous fuel, crackling, spurting out little jets of fire and white smoke intermingled. A great rush of orange fire roared up the chimney and cast its merry dancing light upon them.

Penelope sighed and stirred and sat up. She was going to smile; she was going to confess that she was ashamed but that she simply couldn't help keeling over for a moment. But when she saw John's face she forgot about the smile and apology alike. He was wearing such a queer expression! He looked puzzled, baffled, incredulous.

"What is it, John?" she asked, standing up and going to lean shakily against the chimney.

"It's only— Wait a shake. I don't believe it!"

He hurried into the storeroom, striking a match as he went. He came back, found a candle end, lighted that, and went again into the tiny adjoining cubicle. She heard him rummaging in there until he must have had time to turn things topsy-turvy.

Then he came back to her and closed the door after him and stood, leaning against it, staring at her with that same queer look in his eyes.

"So—whatever it is—it's true, then?" she asked him.

"There's not a scrap of any kind of food in the house," he told her. . . .

They went together to the door through which they had so recently entered as into a still haven, and looked out into the gray sky and across the white world. Again the changeful wind was blowing up from the south. It swept the snow along almost horizontally; it brought back the piercing cold; it began making shrewd cutting pellets of the frozen moisture, blowing up another bliz-

zard. Almost it drove them back indoors. They were glad enough to withdraw and shove the door shut against the rising violence.

"You—you're sure that he is dead? And that some one k-killed him?" whispered Penelope, and shuddered and went hurrying back to their fire.

Yes, he was sure. No use talking about it; no sense speculating. They could do nothing for him. . . .

"It's funny, though, that there's not a single bite to eat here," she said after a while.

"I don't believe it was his cabin," said John. "I think he must have come here for shelter; the place was abandoned when he got here. If he had anything with him in the way of food, he must have cleaned up on it. I've looked everywhere."

"We can't go on—without resting first and getting warm," she said.

And then they looked at each other. By the time they'd rested, perhaps even slept, there'd be no more strength in them than a couple of day-old kittens. And when he tried to guess where they were he could not be any more optimistic than to judge that they might possibly be within a dozen up-and-down miles of any other human habitation.

"Let's get good and warm, shall we?" she said, and at last used the smile she had planned on some little while ago.

It was a lovely little brave smile, John thought, the lovelier and all the braver because her darling lips would tremble so. He just reached out and gathered her to him and buried his face in the warmth of her hair.

"We'll have the bulliest old fire there ever was!" he promised her, recklessly gay, and piled on the wood.

He made a sort of seat for her in the chimney corner, a cushion of an old blanket folded, then covered with his own coat, since the blanket was so untidy to look upon, and since, as he explained, it was so warm in here it was a relief to shed his outer garment. She half sat leaning and half lay gracefully curled up, and he lay on the floor

near her, propped on his elbows with his chin in his hands, looking at her.

"When we get warm," he said, "we'll think of something. There's always a way out, you know, Penelope."

"Yes, John dear," she said, smiling.

Neither appeared to notice the thing she was saying, or that her hand reached out and began toying gently with his soft dark hair. And thus, with the fire very cheery and warm, the two of them went fast asleep.

He awoke first. She, very white, was still fast asleep. She had thrown out one arm. Her little hand, as delicately pretty as he had noted her ears to be, as he knew that she was all over, was half across his chest. He removed it gently; he barely touched his lips to it. He arose with never a sound and resuscitated the dead fire. . . .

"I guess we're on the skids," he soliloquized, and tumbled his wild thatch of hair with both rebellious hands. "We're pegging out, that's all there is to it. Funny. To have met her—Penelope—only now. Not to know who or what she is—God! I do know! She told me! Man alive, she is *Penelope!*"

"Did you call me?" asked Penelope, asleep, and awoke.

She was thirsty. She wanted something hot. She was, he thought, like a poor little worn-out tot of six. He found water running through an open pipe at the side of the house, not yet frozen up. He filled an old coffeepot and warmed it at the fire. By the time he had done this she was wide awake and all her courage had come back. She tried to laugh as she remarked:

"Don't you love to dine, when you're good and hungry, on such delicious hot water?"

"You know," he said, "I'm not the least hungry now."

"Me, too," said Penelope. "I think we're over the worst of it, don't you, John?"

"I know we are. We're going to get a break yet."

"That's man talk, isn't it?" Penelope smiled faintly. She reached out and tucked her hand into his. "It's worth it, John dear—just knowing you. Promise me something?"

"You bet I will—anything," he said stoutly.

She sipped her hot water, then gulped a cupful—then sat back in her corner, looking at him. And her eyes were velvet stars shining down on him from high heaven.

"I-I want to die cozily." Her smile drenched him then, and the hot tears sprang into his eyes and streamed down his face. She saw, and dropped her cup and crept into his arms. "I am growing cold inside, John dear," she whispered. "Warm me with your arms and with your kisses. Kiss me when-when I'm dead and c-cold—"

"Damn!" stormed John. "Damn, oh damn, oh damn! God! Where are you?"

"Hush," whispered Penelope, and snuggled closer and put her finger on his rebellious mouth. "We're together, remember. They'll find us here sometime, won't they, John? Next spring, maybe. Is the door fastened tight, so that— And the windows?"

He knew that she was thinking about the howling timber wolf. He got up—shaky, spent, scarcely able to drag one foot after the other, his brain swimming dizzily—and went to the door. He fumbled with the latch and the door came open. The wind aided and flung it wide. He stood there on the threshold a moment. The gush of frozen air in his face whipped some of the mists out of his brain; his eyes cleared.

He had just asked, "God, where are you?" Here was his answer. It was young Father Kilduff, as strong as a bull and seventeen times as fearless. . . .

Father Kilduff knew death when he looked it in the face. He had a wide experience. He had come here to confess a man who had managed to send him word—a dying man shot through the chest. And now that man was dead, stiffening in the back room; and here were two others who, he saw at a glance, could not last long like this.

He had broken his way through the storm; he had eaten at Jimmy Larkin's cabin a good ten miles away; he had not so much as a scrap of bread with him.

"They look like angels," he thought as he stood over

the two on the hearth. "There is a heavenly light in their eyes. Perhaps God has need of them."

They lay so tightly clasped in each other's arms, too. He wondered about that. "Keep your stout hearts up," he said cheerily. "I'll try to get you out of this."

Penelope smiled at him and tightened her two arms about John's body. "Give us your blessing, Father," she begged. "We're—we're on our way, you know."

And he bowed his head and said, "Yes, I know."

Yes, he saw that they were about to die; and he saw farther, deeper than that: He saw that now they did not care, so that they died in each other's arms. He wondered of their love story; perhaps they had been boy-and-girl sweethearts. He looked even closer; he got down on his knees to look into the girl's face, and once on his knees remained there as though it were the Virgin Mother, herself whom he saw.

He was amazed by her beauty. Always was it touched with the ethereal, and now, as she was about to cast off all the heavier qualities of earth, she became even radiantly ethereal. It was as though she wore a halo already. Then, dragging his eyes from hers, he looked at the man.

"You two love each other—like that?" he asked gently.

They smiled—not at him, but into each other's eyes.

"Not married? Just lovers?" he queried.

Then he married them. And he turned away as they tried to kiss, as their failing arms tried to tighten. He heard a faint whisper from the girl. "We're married, John," she said. "Don't you hear the wedding bells?"

John said, "Oh, how I love you!"

Wedding bells? Father Kilduff ran to the door. There *were* bells. Here came Crazy Barnaby—and at Barnaby's belt were always food and medicine and good strong drink.

Father Kilduff dropped on both knees in the snow. What he said was in Latin, but that didn't matter.

Long ago he had said of Barnaby: "Crazy? I'm not so sure. Anyhow, he's a good boy and God loves him."



*Guns talk when a killer-branded
cowboy rides out to clear his name*

ON THE DODGE

by WILL JAMES

I'D HEARD a few shots the night before, and I had a hunch they was being *exchanged*; but as the deer season was open and the town dudes was out for 'em, I just figgered maybe a couple of bucks had made their last jump, and I let it go at that.

The next morning when I went to run in the ponies for a fresh horse to do the day's riding on, I finds that my big buckskin was missing, my own horse, and one of the best I ever rode. I makes another circle of the pasture and comes to a gate at one corner and stops. On the ground, plain as you wanted to see, was boot marks where some hombre had got off to open the gate and led my buckskin through.

I sure knowed my horse's tracks when I saw 'em, 'cause in shoeing him I'd always take care to round the shoe aplenty so it'd protect the frog when running through the rocks. I'd recognize that round hoofprint anywheres, and I wasn't apt to forget the spike-heel boot mark, either.

I remembers the shots I'd heard, and I wonders if my horse missing that way wasn't on account of somebody being after somebody else and one of 'em, needing a fresh horse right bad, just "borrowed" mine.

Well, I thinks he must of needed him worse than I did, and I sure give him credit for knowing a good horse

when he sees one, but I wasn't going to part with my buckskin that easy.

I runs the other horses in the corral and snares me the best one the company had, opens the gate and straddles him on the jump. Out we go, him a-bucking and a-bawling and tearing down the brush. I didn't get no fun out of his actions that morning—I was in too big a hurry; and when I started to get rough, he lined out like the good horse he was.

I picks up the tracks of the horse thief out of the fence a ways, gets the lay of where he'd headed, and rides on like I was trying to head a bunch of mustangs. About a mile on his trail, I come across a brown saddle horse looking like he'd been sat on fast and steady, and says to my own brown as we ride by like a comet:

"Looks like that hombre sure did need a fresh horse."

I'm heading down a draw on a high lope, wondering why that feller in the lead never tried to cover his tracks, when I hear somebody holler, and so close that I figgered they must of heard me coming and laid for me. I had no choice when I was told to hold 'em up, and that I done.

My thirty-thirty was took away from me; then the whole bunch that I reckoned to be a posse, circled around and a couple searched me for a six-gun without luck.

"Do you recognize that horse, any of you?" asked the one I took to be the sheriff. "Sure looks like the same one," answers a few, and one goes further to remark that my build and clothes sure tallies up with the description.

"Where do you come from and where was you headed in such a hurry?" asks the sheriff.

"I'm from the cow camp on Arrow Springs," I says, "and I'm headed on the trail of somebody who stole my horse last night." And riding ahead with half a dozen carbines pointed my way, I shows 'em the trail I was following.

"Most likely one of our men," one of 'em says; and the sheriff backs him with, "Yes, we just let a man go awhile back."

"The hell you say!" I busts in, getting peeved at being held back that way. "Do you think you house-plants can tell me anything about this track or any other tracks? What's more," I goes on, getting red in the face, "I can show you where I started following it, and where whoever stole my horse left his wore-out pony in the place of mine."

"Now, don't get rambunctious, young feller. Tracks is no evidence in court nohow, and if I'm lucky enough to get you there without you decorating a limb on the way, that's all I care. Where was you night before last?" he asks sudden.

"At the camp, cooking a pot of frijoles; and bedded there afterwards," I answers just as sudden.

"Fine for you so far, but is there anybody up at the camp who can prove you *was* there?"

"No, I'm there alone and keeping tab on a head of dry stuff; but if you'll go to the home ranch, the foreman'll tell you how he hired me some two weeks back, if that'll do any good."

"I'm afraid it won't," he says. "That wouldn't prove anything on your whereabouts the time of the holdup. Your appearance and your horse are against you; you're a stranger in these parts, and the evidence points your way; and till your innocence is proved, I'll have to hold you on the charge of murder along with the robbery of the Torreon County Bank."

That jarred my thoughts considerable, and it's quite a spell before I can round 'em to behave once more. The whole crowd is watching the effect of what the sheriff just said, and I don't aim to let 'em think I was rattled any. I showed about as much expression as a gambling Chink and finally remarks:

"I reckon you ginks has got to get *somebody* for whatever's been pulled off, and it sure wouldn't look right to go back empty-handed, would it?" I says as I size up the bunch.

A couple of the men are sent toward my camp to look for evidence, and two others start on the trail I was fol-

lowing, which leaves the sheriff and three men to escort me to town some sixty miles away.

I'm handcuffed; my reins are took away from me and one of the men is leading my horse. We travel along at a good gait, and I'm glad nobody's saying much; it gives me a chance to think, and right at that time I was making more use out of that think tank of mine than I thought I'd ever need to. I knowed I couldn't prove that I was at my camp the night of the holdup, and me being just ■ drifting cowboy happening to drop in the country at the wrong time, looked kinda bad for suspicious folks.

After sundown when we strike ■ fence and finally come to a ranch house, I was noticing a couple of the men was slopping all over their saddles and getting mighty tired; but I only had feelings for the tired horses that had to pack 'em. One of 'em suggests that they'd better call it a day and stop at the ranch for the night, and we rides in, me feeling worse than a trapped coyote.

I'm gawked at by all hands as we ride up; and I'm not at all pleased when I see one hombre in the family crowd that I do know, 'cause the last time I seen him, I'd caught him blotting the brand on a critter belonging to the company I was riding for and putting his own iron in the place of it. I was always kind of peaceable and kept it to myself, but between him and me, I offered to bet him that if he'd like to try it again I could puncture him and stand off five hundred yards while I was doing it. I'd never seen him since till now.

He gives me a kind of a mean look and I sees he's pleased to notice that I'm being took in for something. They hadn't heard of the holdup as yet, but it wasn't long till the news was spread.

Between bites of the bait that was laid before us, the sheriff took it onto hisself to tell all about it. I was interested to hear what was said, 'cause the details of the holdup was news to me too, and what was most serious was that the two masked bandits killed one man, and another wasn't expected to live; they'd got away with

about ten thousand dollars. The womenfolks sure kept a long ways from me after that.

The conversation was just about at its worst, for me, when the door opened and in walked a young lady, the prettiest young lady I remember ever seeing. All hands turned their heads in her direction as she walked in, and the talk was checked for a spell.

"One of the family," I figgers as she makes her way to the other lady folks. I hears some low talk and feels accusing fingers pointing my way.

In the meantime, the sheriff and his men had cleared most everything that was fit to eat off the table; one of the ladies inquires if they'd like more, but none seemed to worry if I had my fill.

I glances where I figger the young lady to be, and instead of getting a scornful glance, as I'd expected, I finds ■ look in her eyes that's not at all convinced that I could of done all that was said; and a few minutes later there's more warm spuds and roast beef hazed over *my* shoulder, and I knowed the hand that done the hazing was none other than that same young lady's.

From then on the rest of the talk that was soaring to the rafters about me being so desperate was just like so much wind whistling through the pines. I could see nothing and feel nothing but two brown eyes, pretty and understanding brown eyes.

Arrangements was made for a room upstairs, and as the sheriff took the lead, me and the deputies following, I glanced at the girl once more, and as I went up the stairs I carried with me visions of a pretty face with a hint of a smile.

The three deputies unrolled a round-up bed that was furnished, and jumped in together; the sheriff and me took possession of a fancier bed with iron bedsteads. My wrist was handcuffed to his and we made ourselves comfortable as much as we could under the circumstances.

A lot of trouble was made, before the lamp was blowed out, to show there was no use me trying to get away.

In turning over, my fingers come acrost ■ little mohair

rope I used for belt and emergency—"piggin' string" (rope to tie down cattle). It was about six feet long, and soft.

The three deputies, after being in the cold all day and coming in a warm house tired and getting away with all that was on the table, was plumb helpless, and they soon slept and near raised the roof with the snoring they done.

The sheriff, having more responsibility, was kind of restless, but after what seemed a couple of hours he was also breathing like he never was going to wake up, leaving me a-thinking, and a-thinking.

The girl's face was in my mind through all what I thought; and the hint of her smile was like a spur a-driving me to prove that she was right in the stand she'd took. There was three reasons why I should get away and try to get the guilty parties; one was to get my good old buckskin back; another was to clear myself; but the main one, even though I didn't realize it sudden, was the girl.

If the guilty parties wasn't found, I knowed I'd most likely take the place of one of 'em. I just had to clear myself somehow, and the only way was to break loose to do it. I was still fingering the piggin' string at my belt. I couldn't see the window and concluded it must be pitch-dark outside. A coyote howled, and the dogs barked an answer.

"Wonder if I can make it?" And something inside tells me that I'd *better* make it, and now, or I'd never have another chance.

The sheriff acts kinda fidgety as I try to ease my piggin' string under his neck. I lays quiet awhile and tries it again, and about that time he turns over just right and lays over that string as though I'd asked him to. His turning over that way scared me, so that I didn't dare move for a spell; but finally I reach over and grab the end of the string that was sticking out on the other side, makes a slip knot and puts the other end of the string around ■ steel rod of the bedstead; and still hanging on to that end, I'm ready for action.

From then on, I don't keep things waiting. With my handcuffed arm, I gets a short hold on the string; and with my free arm, I gets a lock on the sheriff's other arm all at once. That sure wakes him up, but he can't holler or budge, and the more he pulls with the arm that's handcuffed to mine, the more that string around his neck is choking him. I whispers in his ear to tell me where I can get the keys for the handcuffs before I hang him to dry, and by listening close I hears:

"In my money belt."

I had to let go of his arm to get that key, but before he had time to do anything, my fist connected with the point of his chin in a way that sure left him limp. I takes the handcuffs off my wrist, turns the sheriff over on his stomach and relocks the handcuffs with his arms back of him, stuffs a piece of blanket in his mouth, and cutting the piggin' string in two, ties the muffler in place and uses the other piece to anchor his feet together.

The three deputies on the floor was still snoring away and plumb innocent of what was going on. I sneaks over to where I'd seen 'em lay my rifle, picks out an extra six-shooter out of the holster of one of the sleeping men, and heads to where I thought the window to be.

It was locked from the inside with a stick, and removing that, I raised it easy; and still easier I starts sliding out of the window and down as far as my arms lets me, and lets go.

I picks myself up in ■ bunch of dry weeds and heads for the corrals for anything I could find to ride. I'm making record time on the way and pretty near bumps into somebody.

My borrowed six-shooter is pointed right at that somebody sort of natural, and before I can think—

"Don't shoot, cowboy," says ■ soft voice. "I knowed you'd come, and I been waiting for you. I got the best horse in the country saddled and ready, and if you can ride him, nothing can catch you."

I recognized the young lady; she came closer as she spoke and touched my arm.

"Follow me," she says, pulling on my shirt sleeve, and the tinkle of her spurs and the swish of her riding skirt sounded like so much mighty fine music as I trotted along.

But there was sounds of a commotion at the house. Either the weeds had give me away or the sheriff come out of it. Anyway, a couple of lights was running through the house, doors was slamming, and pretty soon somebody fires a shot.

"Them folks sure have learnt to miss me quick," I remarks as we push open the corral gate. Then I'm up to the snorting pony in two jumps. I see he's hobbled and tied ready to fork; and sticking my rifle through the rosadero, I takes the hobbles off of him, lets him break away with me a-hanging to his side and I mounts him flat-footed as he goes through the gate.

I was making a double getaway, one from the sheriff and the other from the girl. I knowed, the way I felt, it would have seemed mighty insulting for me to try and thank her with little words. I wanted to let her know somehow that *if* she ever wished to see me break my neck, I'd do it *for her*, and with a smile.

"I sure thank you," I says as I passes her (which goes to prove that there's times when a feller often says things he wants to say least), but I had to say something.

The whole outfit was coming from the house. There was a couple more shots fired, and with the noise of the shots, my old pony forgot to take time to buck and lined out like a scared rabbit, me a-helping him all I could. We hit a barb wire fence and went through it like them wires was threads, and went down the draw, over wash-outs and across creeks like it was all level country.

The old pony was stampeding, and it was the first time in my life that I wanted a ride of that kind to last, and being that we was going the direction I wanted to go, I couldn't get there any too fast to suit me.

I'm quite a few miles away from the ranch when I decides I'd better pull up my horse if I wanted to keep him under me after daybreak, and that I did, but I

managed to keep him at a stiff trot till a good twenty-five miles was between us and where we'd left.

Daybreak catches up with us a few miles farther on, and I figgers I'd better stop awhile to let the pony feed and water. I takes a look over the way I just come, and being that I'm halfway up a mountain, I gets ■ good view of the valley, and if anybody is on my trail, I'd sure get to see 'em first and at a good ten miles away.

The little old pony buckles up and tries to kick me as I gets off, and not satisfied with that, takes a run on the hackamore rope and tries to jerk away, but his kind of horseflesh was nothing new to me, and in a short while he was behaving and eating as though he knowed it was the best thing for him to do.

A good horse always did interest me, and as I'm off a ways studying his eleven hundred pounds' worth of good points, I notices ■ sackful of something tied on the back of the saddle.

"Wonder what it can be," I thinks out aloud as I eases up to the horse and unties it. I opens the sack, and finds all that's necessary to the staff of life when traveling light and fast the way I was. There was "jerky" and rice, salt and coffee, with a big tin plate and cup throwed in to cook and eat it out of.

"Daggone her little hidel!" I says, grinning and a-trying to appreciate the girl's thoughtfulness. "Who'd ever thought it?"

I cooked me a bait in no time, and getting around on the outside of it, am able to appreciate life, freedom and a good horse once again. And wanting to keep all that, I don't forget that these hills are full of posse-men, and that the other bunch at the ranch would soon be showing themselves on my trail. There was what I took to be a small whirlwind down on the flat. If it was a dust made by the posse they'd sure made good time considering the short stretch of daylight they'd had to do any tracking by.

I takes another peek out on the flat before cinching up, and sure enough there was little objects bobbing up and down under that dust.

I had the lead on 'em by ten miles, and I knowed if I could get on my horse and was able to stick him, that I'd soon lose 'em, but doing that away from the corral sure struck me as a two-man's job. What I was afraid of most was him getting away from me; his neck was as hard to bend as a pine tree, and his jaw was like iron, but I had to get action, and mighty quick, 'cause the distance between me and them was getting shorter every minute.

It helped a lot that I'd hobbled him before he was rested up from the ride I'd give him that night, and taking the rope off the saddle, I passes one end of it through the hobble and tied it. About then the old pony lets out a snort and he passes me like a blue streak. I just has time to straighten up, give a flip to the rope that was running through my hands, follow it a couple of jumps and get set.

My heels was buried out of sight when the stampeding pony hits the end and the rope tightens up; he made a big jump in the air and as his front feet are jerked out from under him, he lands in a heap and makes the old saddle pop. I follows the rope up to him, keeping it tight so's he can't get his feet back under him, and before he knows it I've got him tied down solid.

I takes a needed long breath and looks out on the flat once more; there's no time to waste, that I can see; them little dark objects of awhile ago had growed a heap bigger and was a-bobbing up and down faster than ever. I straightens up my stirrups, gets as much of the saddle under me as I can, and twists the pony's head so's to hold him down till I'm ready to let him up, and starts to take the rope off his feet.

He knows it the minute he's free, and is up like a shot; he keeps on getting up till I can near see the angels, and when he hit the earth again he lit a-running and straight toward the posse and the ranch.

I tries to haze and turn him with my hat, but he'd just duck out from under it and go on the same way. So far he didn't act as though he wanted to take the time to buck with me, and I'd been glad of it, but now, we just

had to come to ■ turning point and the only way I seen was to scratch it out of him.

Screwing down on my saddle as tight as I could, I brings one of my ten-point "hooks" right up along his neck far as I could reach and drags it back. That sure stirred up the dynamite in him of a sudden, and I had a feeling that the cantle of my saddle was a fast mail train and I was on the track; but he turned, and as luck would have it I was still with him. He kept on a-turning and all mixed in with his sun-fishing and side-winding sure made it a puzzle to tell which was heads or tails.

What worried me most was the fear of being set afoot, and I'd been putting up ■ *safe* ride on that account, but that old pony wasn't giving me a fair deal. He fought his head too much, and I was getting tired of his fooling. I reaches down, gets ■ shorter holt on the hackamore rope and lets him have it, both rowels a-working steady—and two wildcats tied by the tail and throwed across the saddle couldn't of done any more harm.

We sure made a dust of our own out there on the side of that mountain, and I'd enjoyed the fight more if things had of been normal, but they wasn't, and I had the most to lose. The little horse finally realized that, the way I went at him, 'cause pretty soon his bucking got down to crowhopping and gradually settled down to a long run up the slope of the mountain. That young lady was sure right when she said that if I could ride him, nothing could catch me.

He was pretty well winded when we got to the top, but I could see he was a long ways from tired, and letting him jog along easy we started down into a deep canyon.

My mind is set on tracking down the feller what stole my buckskin horse, and I figgers the way I'm heading I'll sometime come across his trail, but I'd like mighty well to shake loose from that bunch chasing me before I get much farther; and thinking strong on that, I spots a bunch of mustangs a mile or so to my left, and there was my chance to leave a mighty confusing trail for them that was following.

I sneaks up out of sight and above the "fuzztails," and when I am a few hundred yards off, I shows up sudden over a ridge and heads their way. I lets out a full-grown war whoop as I rides down on 'em, and it sure don't take the wild ones long to make distance from that spot.

My horse being barefooted and his hoofs wore smooth, his tracks blend in natural with that of the mustangs, and I keeps him right in the thick of 'em. The wild ones make a half circle which takes me out of my way some, but I'm satisfied to follow, seeing that it also takes me on the outskirts of where I figgered some of the posse outfit might be.

My horse was ganting up and getting tired, but them wild ponies ahead kept him wanting to catch up; and me holding him down to a steady long lope made him all the more anxious to get there with 'em.

I was wishing I could stop to let him feed and rest awhile, but I didn't dare to just yet; my trail wasn't covered up well enough.

The sun is still an hour high when the wild ones I was following came out of the junipers and lined out across a little valley. I figgers I'm a good seventy-five miles from where I made my getaway, and even though my horse hates to have the mustangs leave him behind, he's finally willing to slow down to a walk. I rubs his sweaty neck and tells him what a good horse he is, and for the first time I notice his ears are in a slant that don't show meanness.

The wild ones run ahead and plumb out of sight; the sun had gone over the hill, and it was getting dark, and on the back trail I don't see no sign of any posse. Still following the trail the mustangs had left, I begins to look for a place where I can branch off, and coming acrost a good-sized creek I turns my horse up it into the mountains.

"Old pony," I say to my horse as we're going along in the middle of the stream, "if that posse is within twenty miles of us, they're sure well mounted; and what's more," I goes on, "if they can tell our tracks from all the fresh

tracks we've left scattered through the country behind, in front and all directions, why, they can do a heap more than any human I know of."

"I'm a couple of miles up the mountain and still following the stream, when a good grassy spot decides me to make camp. The little horse only flinches as I get off this time, and he don't offer to jerk away. I pulls the saddle off, washes his back with cool water and hobbles him on the tall grass, where he acts plumb contented to stay and feed.

Clouds are piling up over the mountain; it's getting cold and feels like winter coming on. I builds me a small Injun fire, cooks me up a bait, and rolling a smoke, stretches out.

"Some girl," I caught myself saying as I throwed my dead cigarette away. . . . The little horse rolled out ■ snort the same as to say, "All is well," and pretty soon I'm not of the world no more.

It's daylight when a daggone magpie hollers out and makes me set up, and I wonders as I stirs up the coffee what's on the program for today. My horse acts real docile as I saddles him up; he remembers when I gives his neck ■ rub that it pays to be good.

I crosses on one side of a mountain pass and on over ■ couple of ridges and down into another valley of white sage and hardpan. I don't feel it safe to come out in the open and cross that valley, so I keeps to the edge close to the foothills and junipers.

My horse, picking his way on the rocky trail, jars a boulder loose and starts it down to another bigger boulder that's just waiting for that much of an excuse to start rolling down to the bottom of the canyon; a good many more joins in, and a noise echoes up that can be heard a long ways.

As the noise of the slide dies down, I hears a horse nicker, and it sounds not over five hundred yards away. I didn't give my horse ■ chance to answer, and a hunch makes me spur up out of the canyon and over the ridge. I was afraid of the dust I'd made in getting over the ridge.

I'm splitting the breeze down a draw; and looking back over my shoulder, I'm just in time to get the surprise of my life. A whole string of riders are topping the ridge I'd just went over, and here they come heading down on me hell-bent for election. I know it's them, and I know they seen my dust; and worse yet, I know they're on fresh horses.

"Now," I asks the scenery, "how in Sam Hill do you reckon for them to be in this perticular country, and so quick?" And the only answer I could make out was that when I struck the mustangs and put too many tracks in front of 'em for 'em to follow, they just trusted to luck and cut acrost to where they thought I'd be heading.

My only way out is speed, and my pony is giving me all he can of that; but it's beginning to tell on him, and I don't like the way he hits the other side of the washouts we come acrost.

A bullet creases the bark off a pinon not far to my right; another raises the dust closer, and even though I sure hated to, I had to start using the spurs. The little horse does his final best, and I begins to notice that the bullets are falling short, and it ain't long when I'm out of range of 'em.

"Old-timer," I says to my tired horse as we're drifting along, "if you only had a few hours' rest, we'd sure make them hombres back of us wonder how thin air could swallow us so quick."

We tops a rise in the foothills, and ahead of us is a bunch of mustangs. They evaporate quick, leaving a big cloud of dust. They can't do me any good this time; my horse is too far gone; but I thinks of another way and proceeds to act.

I reaches over, takes the hackamore off my horse's head and begins to loosen the latigo. My pony's took heart to keep up the speed awhile longer, on account of them wild ones ahead, and wanted to catch up with 'em.

My saddle cinch is loose and a-flapping to one side; my chance comes as we go through a thick patch of buck-brush, and I takes advantage of it. I slides off my horse

and takes my saddle with me; the old pony has nothing on him but the sweat where my saddle'd been. There's mustangs ahead, and with a snort and a shake of his tail he bids me good-by and disappears.

About that time me and my "riggin'" ain't to be seen no more, and when the posse rides by on the trail my horse'd left, there was a big granite boulder and plenty of buckbrush to keep me hid, and looking straight ahead for a dust, the sheriff and his three men kept right on a-going.

But I figgered they'd be back, sometime, and thinks I'd better be a-moving. I hangs my saddle up a pinon tree, leaves most of the grub with it, and, tearing up the gunnysack that was around it, proceeds to pad up my feet so they'd leave as little track as possible. Then I picks up my rifle and heads up towards a high point on the mountain where I could get the lay of the country.

I'm on what seems to be a high rocky ledge, and looking around for some shelter in it from the cold wind, and where I can hole up for the night, I comes to the edge of *nothing*—and stops short!

Another step, and I'd went down about three hundred feet; a fire at the bottom of it showed me how deep it was, and by that fire was two men; maybe they're deer-hunters, I thinks. I keeps a-sizing up the outfit, and then I spots three hobbled ponies feeding to one side aways, and there amongst 'em was my good old buckskin. I'd recognize his two white front feet and his bald face anywheres.

I'm doing some tall figgering by then, and I has a hunch that before daybreak I'll be well mounted again and on my own horse. Seeing that my rifle was in good working order, I slides down off my perch to where going down is easier and surer of a foothold. I'm down about halfways, and peeking through a buckbrush, I gets a better look at them two hombres by the fire. The more I size 'em up, the surer I gets of my suspicions.

I'm close enough to see that one of the men is about my build, and not only that, but it looks like he had on my clothes. The other man I couldn't make much out of—he was laying down on his face as though he was

asleep; but I could see he was some stouter and shorter.

Well, all appearances looked a safe bet to me, and beating my own shadow for being noiseless, I gets to within a hundred feet of 'em.

"Stick 'em up," I says quiet and steady for fear of their nerves being on edge and stampeding with 'em. One of 'em flinches some but finally reaches for the sky, the other that's laying down don't move, and I warns him that playing possum don't go with me; but threatening didn't do no good there. I'm told that he's wounded and out of his head—I remember the sheriff saying that one of the men had been wounded, which altogether tallied up fine as these being the men *me* and the sheriff wanted.

"Take his hands away from his belt and stretch 'em out where I can see 'em then," I says, not wanting to take the chance. That done, I walks over toward 'em and stops, keeping the fire between. I notice that the man laying has no gun on or near him; the other feller with his arms still up is packing two of 'em, and I makes him shed them by telling him to unbuckle his cartridge belt.

I backs him off at the point of my rifle and goes to reaching for the dropped belt and six-guns, when from behind and too close for comfort somebody sings out for me to drop my rifle and reach for the clouds. I does that plenty quick, and looking straight ahead like I'm told to, I sees a grin spreading all over the face of the man I'd just held up a minute ago.

"Where does this third party come in?" thinks I. My six-shooter is jerked out of my belt as I try to figger a way out, and is throwed out of reach along with my rifle; and then of a sudden the light of the fire in front of me was snuffed out, and with a sinking feeling all went dark. . . .

When I come to again, I hear somebody groaning, and I tries to get my think tank working; my head feels about the size of a washtub, and sore. Whatever that hombre hit me with sure wasn't no feather pillow. I tries to raise a hand and finds they're both tied; so is my feet, and about all I can move is my eyelashes. Things come

back to me gradual, and star-gazing at the sky I notice it's getting daybreak.

Hearing another groan, I manages to turn my head enough to see the same hombre that'd been laying there that night and in the same position. I hears the other two talking, off a ways. It sounds by the squeak of saddle leather that they're getting ready to move, and that sure wakes me up to action.

I know I can't afford to let 'em get away, and I sure won't. Raising up far as I can, I hollers for one of 'em to come over a minute. There's some cussing heard, but soon enough here comes the tallest one, and he don't no more than come near me when I asks him to give me a chance to loosen up my right boot, that my sprained ankle was bothering me terrible.

"You needn't think you can pull anything over on me," he says sarcastic. He sizes my boot up awhile and then remarks: "But I'll let you pull 'em both off. I need a new pair."

My arms and feet are free, but awful stiff; he's standing off a few feet, and with rifle ready for action is watching me like a hawk while I'm fidgeting around with my right boot; I gets my right hand inside of it as though to feel my ankle, but what I was feeling for mostly was a gun I'd strapped in there.

When I started out on the trail of my buckskin I figgered on getting him; I also figgered on running acrost somebody riding him that'd be a gunman, and I'd prepared to compete with all the tricks of the gun-toter. This gun in my boot was what I called *my hole card*.

My foot is up and toward him, and I'm putting on a lot of acting while getting hold of the handle and pulling back the hammer, but I manages that easy enough and squeezing my finger towards the trigger, I pulls.

That shot paralyzed him, and down he come. He'd no more than hit the ground when I falls on the rifle he'd dropped, and I starts pumping lead the direction of the other feller. His left arm was bandaged and tied up, but he was sure using his right so that our shots was passing

one another halfways and regular. . . . Then I felt a pain in my left shoulder. I begins to get groggy—and pretty soon all is quiet once more.

I must of been disconnected from my thoughts for quite a spell, 'cause when I come to, this time the sun is way high. I straightens up to look around and recollect things, and it all came back some as I gets a glimpse of my buckskin feeding off a ways.

My shoulder's stiff and sore, but feeling around for the harm the bullet has done, I finds I'd just been creased, and being weak on account of not having anything under my belt either in the line of grub or moisture for the last twenty-four hours, that bullet was enough to knock me out.

I'm hankering for a drink right bad and starts looking for it on all fours, when in my rambling, I comes across a shadow, and looking right hard I can make out horse's hoofs, then his legs and on up to a party sitting on top of him and looking down at me. The warm sun had made me weak again, and I quits right there.

Somebody's pouring cool water down me, and when I opens my eyes again, I feels better control of 'em. I asked when I et last and I can't seem to remember; then I gets a vision of a pot of coffee, and flapjacks, I smells frying bacon, and the dream that I'm eating evaporates with the last bite.

"Well, I see you found your buckskin," says a voice right close, and recognizing that voice makes me take notice of things. It was the sheriff's; the posse'd rode in on me.

"And by the signs 'around here," the same voice goes on, "it looks like you just got here in time and had to do a heap of shooting in order to get him, but I'm sure glad to see you did, 'cause along with that horse you got the two men we wanted for the robbery, which makes you free to go. No mistake this time."

That last remark brought real life to me, and interested again, I takes a look around. The two men was setting against a rock looking mighty weak and shot up.

I looks for the third, and I'm told that he was being took in to the nearest ranch for care he was needing mighty bad.

"How does he come to be with these hombres?" I asks.

"He's ■ government service man out after these two outlaws," says the sheriff, "and your dropping in when you did is all that saved him—if we hadn't heard your shot, we'd never found this hole, and he'd been left to feed the buzzards."

Not wanting to hog all the credit, I says: "I've sure got to hand it to you too—for camping on a feller's trail the way you do it wasn't at all comfortable."

"Neither is a piggin' string around a feller's neck," comes back the sheriff, smiling.

It's after sundown as I tops a ridge and stops my buckskin. Out across a big sage and hardpan flat is a dust stirred up by the posse and their prisoners. I watches it a spell, and starting down the other side of the ridge, I remarks: "Buck, old horse, I'm glad you and me are naturally peaceable, 'cause being that way not only saves us from a lot of hard traveling, but it's a heap easier on ■ feller's think tank."

The evening star looks near as big as the moon as I glances up to keep my bearings straight; I finds myself gazing at it, and then comes a time when my vision is plumb past it, ■ vision of two brown eyes and a hint of a smile.

Then the buckskin shook himself and at the same time shook me back to realizing that I was on a horse.

"Some day soon we're going visiting, Buck," I says, coming to; and untangling the knots out of my pony's mane as I rides, I heads him up the trail back to the cow camp on Arrow Springs.



by HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

YOUNG PETE PAYS A BILL

The kid made gun medicine to square an account

THE Arizona sun hammered the rocky hillside. Heat danced in the valley below. Gaunt with hunger and lack of sleep, Young Pete lay on a ridge watching the approach of a distant horseman. In spite of the heat the horse came on at a swinging stride.

Pete glanced at his own horse tied down the hillside back of him. The buckskin was played out. Its head drooped dejectedly.

Not far north, Buck Yardlaw, sheriff of Apache County, was whipsawing the country, trying to pick up Young Pete's trail, lost the evening before in Tecolote Canyon. Jim Wolf, horse-thief, gunman of the cattle king, Bodie, had been shot. Young Pete had been accused of the shooting, although he was not in the town of Tecolote when it occurred. Jim Wolf had been all shot to pieces. So had his boss, Bodie.

"Wonder they didn't try to pin the killin' of Bodie onto me, also," grumbled Pete, his alert eye on the approaching horseman. "They're pinnin' all the killin's in this country on Young Pete." Pete's mouth tightened. "But they're goin' to get fooled. I don't aim to let 'em put it over. I didn't even know Wolf or Bodie."

As the horseman drew nearer, Pete's tired eyes brightened. The rider had a fine animal, a mount that could

distance Buck Yardlaw and his posse at any turn of the trail. And once out of the neighborhood, Young Pete would hunt up his old friend Dave Hamill and they'd hightail for a more peaceful country.

Leaving his canteen and rifle on the ridge, Pete made his way down a dry watercourse. Concealed behind a boulder near the trail, he listened to the approaching hoofbeats. A fine horse!

The hot sunlight was dazzling. Pete closed his eyes against the glare. When he opened them again, he saw a second rider, his face masked with blue bandanna, coming cautiously down the opposite slope. The masked horseman dismounted and concealed himself behind the brush about twenty yards away.

Young Pete cocked his six-shooter and watched.

The approaching horseman stopped, for the man in the blue bandanna had stepped into view. Sunlight twinkled on the barrel of his gun. The man on horseback put up his hands. A big man, cool, deliberate, he sat his horse solidly.

"Take off your hat," ordered the masked man.

A flame of red hair showed as the first rider lifted his sombrero.

"You're Doc Hapgood, all right," said the masked man.

"I am," replied the man on horseback.

"Where you headed for?"

"Tecolote."

"What's your business in Tecolote?"

"It's certainly none of yours!" the rider snapped. "I'm in a hurry. I'm on my way to save a man's life."

"Whose life?"

"Jim Wolf, of Tecolote."

"Well, you're wastin' time. Just turn around and ride the other way."

The doctor's face flamed. "Suppose I choose to keep on the way I'm headed?"

"You won't get far."

To Young Pete, crouched behind the boulder, it

seemed that the big man on the big horse was about to ride the holdup down. Stepping out quickly, Young Pete flung a sharp command at the man in the blue bandanna. Startled by the voice behind him, the masked outlaw let his gun fall from his hand. The doctor sat still on his horse, staring at Young Pete.

"Don't go for your gun, Doc," Young Pete said. "I'll take care of him." Pete stepped up to the outlaw, still keeping the doctor covered.

"Dent," said Young Pete, eying a long blue scar on the back of the masked man's hand, "you ought to wear gloves so folks won't recognize you." Pete laughed. "You—a holdup man! Are you practicin', since your boss, Bodie, got downed?"

"Is this Dent?" The doctor surveyed the outlaw. "I've heard of you. Someone told me you were Jim Wolf's friend."

Dent cursed but refused to admit his identity. A glance at Dent's horse showed Pete that the outlaw had no saddle-gun.

"Get goin'!" commanded Young Pete.

"Yes, and if you watch close, one of these times you'll see me comin'," Dent sneered as he mounted.

The junipers whipped behind him as he forged up the western slope of the valley. For an instant Dent's horse was skylined on the western ridge, and then disappeared. The doctor mopped his forehead.

"Just step down," said Young Pete. "I want that horse you're ridin'."

"He isn't for sale," said the doctor.

Pete's voice was cold. "That ain't the idea. I want him."

"So do I." The red-headed doctor grinned genially. "I'm in a hurry."

"Same here," echoed Young Pete.

The red-headed doctor eyed Pete shrewdly. "So you're just like that man Dent, eh? Stopping a doctor on his way to attend a badly wounded man."

"Wouldn't stop anybody from helpin' a sick man,"

said Young Pete stubbornly. "But I'm on foot."

The doctor could not see the whirl of dust up the road. But Pete saw it. Yardlaw's posse had at last found his trail.

"Step down off that horse!" Young Pete commanded grimly.

The red-headed doctor made no move to dismount. "The man who sent for me is shot up pretty bad," he explained. "He's a horse-thief, but ■ doctor plays no favorites."

"I got to have a horse." Pete glanced again at the cloud of dust up the road.

"Why didn't you take Dent's horse?"

"He wasn't shod. I need a shod horse where I'm goin'."

"You've got the drop on me," said the doctor. "If you intend to let me go through to Tecolote, why, all right. If you don't," the doctor looked Young Pete straight in the eye, "why, shoot!"

Swiftly Young Pete holstered his gun. "You got sand! I've changed my mind about your horse. Get goin'!" Pete again eyed the approaching dust cloud. "Forget you ever seen me."

"I'll do that!" said the doctor heartily, taking up the reins.

As Young Pete hastened up the ridge he heard the sound of hoofs. The dust cloud had developed into Buck Yardlaw and his posse. Pete sank back out of sight. Over the sights of his rifle he watched Yardlaw overtake the doctor. Their voices came clearly.

"Doc Hapgood, isn't it?" said Yardlaw.

"The same, Sheriff."

"Seen anything of a young fella about fifteen or sixteen, dark complexioned and ridin' a buckskin horse? Goes by the name of Young Pete?"

Pete's grip tightened on the rifle. But the doctor shook his head. Yardlaw seemed surprised.

"We trailed him to the forks, yonder. He must have took to the brush."

"The only mounted man I've seen," said the red-

headed doctor, "was riding a sorrel pony. And that man wasn't young. He was masked with a handkerchief and had a long scar on the back of his left hand. He held me up and asked me questions. Finally he took to the brush, over that way. What do you want this Young Pete for?"

"For shooting Jim Wolf of Tecolote," said the sheriff of Apache County.

"Jim Wolf?" Doctor Hapgood glanced from one to another of Yardlaw's posse. "That's the man I'm on my way to see."

"You better hurry," said Yardlaw grimly, "or there won't be any Wolf left to see." He nodded to his men, who cut Dent's trail and followed it up the western slope of the valley. Yardlaw and the red-headed doctor kept on down the road together.

Pete slipped down to the bottom of the hill, mounted his horse, and headed south.

That evening the sheepherder, Manuel Escobar, was surprised to see his friend Pete ride in on a horse barely able to walk.

"You have had trouble, eh?" said Manuel.

Young Pete grinned wanly as he slid to the ground. "Trouble? Say, that man Yardlaw is after me. Says I shot Jim Wolf."

"You?" said Manuel, taking Pete's horse. "You make the joke?"

"It won't be a joke if Yardlaw gets me!"

Pete glanced at the sheepherder's cabin, the shed, the low corral and the ring of surrounding timber. A lonely and little frequented section, this mountain country, and a good place to rest for a week or two.

Manuel led the way into the low-roofed house. He was poor, had little food, but he was always willing to share what he had with Young Pete. He made coffee and warmed up some frijoles and goat's meat.

"You eat!" he said.

Pete ate. It was something he had been wanting to do for some time. But he hadn't been able to get much since he had left Dave Hamill so hurriedly, at Tecolote.

Later he had heard that Wolf was not dead; only seriously wounded. But by that time Pete was well on his way south.

Pete finished eating the last bean, wiped his mouth and stood up. "Anybody up at the shack?" he asked.

Manuel shook his head. "Then I'll bush out there a spell. Put my horse where he won't attract attention."

"I feex heem."

"Say, Manuel, do you know Doc Hapgood? A red-headed fella—lives over Tecolote way."

"Doc Hapgood?" Manuel's gesture was eloquent. "He is what you say beeg man. Beeg heart."

Pete rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Wonder if I'll ever meet up with him again?"

For a week Young Pete hid out, sleeping in the mountain shack above Manuel's cabin. Manuel saw that Pete got food, and he took care of Pete's horse.

Toward the end of the week Pete grew restless. He was broke and Manuel was poor. Besides Pete wanted to get track of his friend Dave Hamill. Where Dave was he had no idea, but Tecolote was the nearest town.

"You don' go to Tecolote," urged Manuel. "Jim Wolf, he dead now. People say Young Pete he kill Jim Wolf."

"I got to get some dough," said Pete. "And no one knows me in Tecolote. Now Yardlaw is back in San Carlos, I'll be safe enough."

Manuel shook his head anxiously. "Nobody safe since Bodie was kill. Now Jim Wolf die, it is very bad. I go to Tecolote for you."

"No," said Young Pete. "I'd like to take a look at Tecolote, and kind of size up the town I was supposed to have shot Jim Wolf in. Was only in that town once and then I didn't have time to finish my dinner."

His horse reshod by Manuel, Pete rode down to Tecolote. He found out Dave Hamill was not in town. Pete drifted into the Gila bar. He had heard that Jim Hazard, foreman of the Bodie ranch, was hiring cowboys.

"At least that's what he calls 'em!" Pete's informant grinned.

The Bodie ranch? Jim Wolf was one of that outfit. Bodie's men should know right well he hadn't shot Wolf. Pete wanted to talk with Jim Hazard and find out why he had been accused of killing a man he had never seen. That squared up, Pete decided to strike Hazard for a job. Fighting cowboys were in demand.

He finally located Hazard at the Marvin Hotel, in the barroom. Pete told Hazard he was looking for work. Hazard invited him to have a drink. Pete took a cigar, aware that Hazard was sizing him up.

"I could use another hand," said the foreman. "How old are you, button?"

"Fifteen."

"Where'd you work last?"

"Old Man Butterfield of Las Vegas."

Hazard smiled. "Tame cows and rockin'-chair ponies, hey?" He gazed at the slender, bright-eyed young cowboy and shook his head slowly. "I've got to be a mite careful who I hire, right now."

"I reckon I savvy," said Pete, pulling out his last dollar and laying it on the bar. "I'm kind of careful, myself, but I'll risk askin' you to take a drink."

Hazard laughed. "I'll take another whisky."

Pete took another cigar. Several men had come in since he had arrived and he noticed that several of the men had stared pretty hard at him. He decided to leave.

"Mr. Hazard," he said, facing the foreman. "One more question, and then I'm on my way. Just why is everybody tryin' to hang the killin' of Jim Wolf onto that there Young Pete? I got proof that Young Pete wasn't in Tecolote when Wolf was shot."

Hazard's keen blue eyes narrowed. "You have, eh?" He studied Pete's face a moment. "One of our boys saw Young Pete shoot Wolf and make his getaway on a buckskin pony."

"Thanks," said Pete. "I guess I'll drift."

"What do you know about the killing?" said Hazard as Pete turned to go.

"I just know Young Pete didn't do it." As Pete started

for the door, the bartender leaned over and whispered to Hazard, "You let a good man get away, Tom."

"That button?"

"That button is Young Pete."

"The hell you say!" Hazard called Pete back. "Ever work down on the Tonto?" he said.

Pete cocked his sombrero over one eye. "You're askin' me somethin'."

"Got any friends up this way?"

"I got a horse and a gun."

"I admire to say you got nerve," said the foreman. "And I'd hate to see you get into any more trouble. Better shuffle right along."

Pete turned and again started for the doorway. He was halfway across the room when two men entered hurriedly. Hazard was surprised to see Young Pete back slowly up to the bar and stand watching them. As the foremost of the two men raised his hand, Pete grinned as he saw the long, blue scar on the back of Dent's hand.

Dent and his companion, Slattery, lounged up to the bar. Dent kept his gaze fixed on Pete. The group at the bar seemed to be attracting considerable attention. The hum of conversation died down.

"Is that the man over there who shot Jim Wolf?" Hazard asked Dent.

"That kid? No. That's a no-account young hoss-wrangler. Don't know his name."

"You sure he ain't Young Pete—the man who killed Wolf?"

"Dead sure! But that don't mean I ain't got somethin' to say to him."

"You better go slow, Dent," cautioned the foreman. But Dent shoved Hazard aside, pulled and fired in one motion.

Pete was not to be caught by such a trick. As Hazard staggered to one side, Pete leaped to the other. The shot gouged the top of the bar. Amid a general scramble for safety Dent chopped down to fire again, but jerked as a shot from Pete took him in the chest. Stunned, Dent

dropped his gun and walked slowly toward the back of the room.

Dent's companion, Slattery, pulled and threw a hasty shot at Pete on general principles. He missed, lost his nerve. Dropping his gun, he thrust up his hands.

Holding him covered, Pete laughed. He was still grinning at Slattery as he backed out of the room. Pete didn't know how hard Dent was hit, but he did know that Tecolote was getting too warm for him.

He was on his horse and well out of town before the Marvin Hotel bar had readjusted itself to the latest shooting. Dent was badly wounded, Slattery had disappeared, and Tom Hazard, a glass of whisky in his hand, stood talking to several acquaintances.

"Dent didn't know Young Pete when I pointed him out," he said in reply to a question. "Yet Dent told Buck Yardlaw that Young Pete shot Wolf."

Pete rode cautiously. The road he traveled led to the Bodie ranch. The hill trail to Manuel's cabin left the road four miles out of town. He was within a few hundred yards of the trail when a rifle cracked in the brush. Pete felt the tearing shock of a bullet. Flinging himself forward, he hung his spurs in his pony's flanks, racing for cover. A second shot buzzed past his head. The buckskin swept on, taking the winding trail at a gallop.

Hit somewhere between the knee and the thigh, Pete began to grow faint and sick from loss of blood, but he dared not stop.

"Give ■ brave man a chance," his old friend Tonto Charley had often told him, "but never turn a coward loose."

Pete cursed himself for having let Slattery go. He didn't doubt for a minute but that Slattery had ambushed him. Far up in the mountain, Pete stopped, twisted his bandanna 'round his leg and rode on. It was slow going now, the buckskin climbing the steep, rugged trail steadily but with evident effort.

Dizzy and almost blind with weakness, Pete clung to the saddle horn. It was almost dusk when he reached

Manuel's cabin and slid from the saddle. The shepherd carried him into the cabin and hastened to get water.

"The red-headed doctor—San Carlos," whispered Pete as he lay on Manuel Escobar's cot.

The old Mexican nodded. Young Pete was his friend. Fourteen hours later the red-headed doctor, his saddle-bags over his arm, entered the cabin.

"Well, young fellow?" he said.

Pete was barely conscious but he managed to utter a greeting. "Lead poisonin'," he murmured, trying to smile.

"Bad stuff, lead. Especially for kids."

"Mebby I ain't such a kid," murmured Pete, and fainted.

Pete did not become fully conscious until morning. The red-headed doctor stood looking down at him.

"Guess you'll have to dig it out," said Pete.

"It's out," replied the doctor. "My charge is twenty-five dollars. You can pay me when you get round again."

"Thanks. Say, Doc, about that time in Andreas Valley——"

"You're running a little temperature, and imagining things. I never saw you before. First thing you know you'll be imagining you're Young Pete."

Pete grinned wanly. "What do you know about Young Pete?"

The red-headed doctor turned and busied himself packing his saddle-bags. "Well, I know something that Buck Yardlaw doesn't know. I know Young Pete didn't shoot Jim Wolf."

"That so?" asked Pete.

The red-headed doctor smiled. "I can tell you this. If it comes to a showdown, I'll tell who shot Jim Wolf and why. And I'll tell who shot his boss, Bodie. If you see Young Pete, tell him that."

Brusquely the doctor wrote out a prescription. "Keep your wound clean," he told Pete. "Manuel can get this filled for you at Tecolote. Twice a day—morning and

night. And keep away from more lead. It's bad for kids. As soon as you can ride, try another climate."

"Thanks, Doc. I got it all. Say, when can I get goin' again?"

"Take it easy for a couple of weeks. If I were in your boots, I'd take 'em off, get me a pair of sheepherder's shoes, and herd sheep for a change."

The doctor stepped out into the morning sunlight, got his horse and rode off. Manuel and his dogs stood watching the doctor as he went down the hillside.

"He dam' good hombre!" said Manuel. The dogs wagged their tails.

Doctor Hapgood had been right. To go to work as a cowboy meant recognition, sooner or later. And there was little else that Pete could do. Nor would it be an easy task getting out of the country, just then. Young Pete's name was heard in every saloon, pool-hall, and ranch in Arizona. Crimes that Pete had never committed were charged to him. Places where he had never been were his common haunts. People who had never seen him told fearsome tales of his gun battles and killings. And Dent, slowly recovering from his wound, declared that Young Pete had shot Jim Wolf. Perhaps Dent's declaration did more to injure Pete's reputation than anything else.

Fearful that Manuel Escobar might become involved in his troubles, Pete decided to get out of the country—to head for Texas. He had an idea that Dave Hamill had drifted down that way. Dave had always said that in case they got separated, and the climate got too warm, to look for him in Texas. It was Dave's well-worn joke, but Pete knew there was more than a little meaning in it.

Garbed as a sheepherder, Pete set out on foot along the mountain range south of Tecolote. There were several sheep camps there. And Manuel Escobar had friends who would give Pete a hand in case of need.

A month after he had left Manuel's, Pete found himself in the Cornudas hills, close to the Texan border. He had let his hair grow long, and he was bronzed by living

constantly in the open. Naturally dark, he now looked like a Mexican.

His overalls, his heavy-soled shoes, his tattered black felt hat, his black cotton shirt and his ability to speak the Spanish of the sheep camps proved to be a disguise more complete than he had hoped.

While in Arizona he had heard that the red-headed doctor had left San Carlos, unable to make a living there. No one knew where he had gone. Pete had taken the news with a wry smile. The doctor had done him a great service and he hadn't contributed a cent toward the doctor's expenses.

Young Pete was never at a loss for long. He left the sheep camp in the Cornudas with a stick in his hand, a sack of food over his shoulder, and five dollars in his pocket. He arrived in the Texas Panhandle riding a fair horse, equipped with an old but serviceable saddle and bridle. No longer afoot, Pete began to feel like his old self. And the gun and holster just below his armpit gave him a renewed feeling of assurance.

Drifting south, Pete headed in the general direction of Tascosa, situated in the middle of the great I X L and X I T cattle ranges. Unknown in Texas, he thought he might be able to get work with one or the other of these outfits. The country was grassy and rolling, with little brush. The roads were mere wagon tracks.

Many miles from his destination, Pete saw a solitary horseman cutting across the prairie toward the west. Nearer Pete noticed the man had his right arm in a sling, that he was young and tall and rode with an exceedingly long stirrup leather.

Eternal vigilance had honed Pete's wits to a razor edge. He saw the horseman jerk his sombrero down in a peculiar manner. Pete grinned. This rider looked familiar. As they came closer, Young Pete recognized his pal, Dave Hamill.

Pete asked him where he was headed. Dave Hamill nodded toward the west.

"Then I'll ride with you," said Pete in Spanish.

Dave stared, then laughed. "Hanged if you didn't pretty near fool me. But you don't sit a horse like a shepherd." "

"I got a shepherd's appetite," said Pete. "Where you been hidin' out?"

Dave gestured. "Texas. It's a bigger state than Arizona. Pete, I'm plumb glad to see you. Last I heard they were crowdin' you mighty close."

Pete nodded. "Too close."

Dave pointed toward the west. "Tascosa is about two hours' ride from here. I'm takin' this busted wing to the doctor so he can look at it again. Never had a doctor in Tascosa until he came. Seems Arizona wasn't able to pay his wages. He's red-headed."

Pete swore. "Bet I know his name. Bet it's Hapgood!"

"That's the name he uses," affirmed Dave.

Long shadows reached out behind them as they rode their loping ponies across the rolling grass land.

"Pete," Dave said finally, "I never thought you shot Jim Wolf. Are they still after you?"

"You notice how I'm dressed, don't you?"

Dave hesitated. "Well, you'll find it plumb roomy down here. Me, I'm ridin' for the I X L. The foreman will be in Tascosa tomorrow morning."

"Thanks," said Pete nodding. "So will I."

Arriving in town, Dave Hamill made for the doctor's office, Pete following him. The town buildings were all adobe, each facing the small plaza. The doctor's office, a long, low-ceilinged single room, was scantily furnished with a pine table, two wooden chairs, a small shelf of books, a wall cabinet containing medicines, and a trunk.

Hapgood gave no sign that he recognized Pete.

Dave Hamill laughed. "Don't worry, Doc," he said. "Me and Pete been partners for quite a spell."

The doctor merely felt of the splints on Dave's arm, told him to carry it as carefully as he would a new-born babe, and dismissed him.

"New-born babe!" snorted Dave. "Just watch mother step over to the store and have a drink!"

Pete lingered. When he and the doctor were alone, they gazed at each other.

"How's the leg?" Hapgood asked.

"All right. Say, Doc, about that bill I owe you?"

The red-headed doctor waved his hand. "Never mind that just now, young man! We'll talk about that later. What are you doing in Texas?"

"Huntin' a job. I heard you left Tecolote. But I didn't know you were here."

"Quite a lot of smallpox down this way. They need medical advice."

"Speakin' of business—nobody knows me down here except you and Dave Hamill. I kind of like it that way."

"You never told me who you were, either." The doctor laughed. Then his face grew grave. "About that shooting affair—Bodie, and Jim Wolf. I happen to know you didn't do that. I was the last man to see Wolf alive. He died while I was in his room. Before he died, he gave me his written confession. He killed Bodie. And I have it in his own handwriting that two men, neither of them answering your description, shot him."

"You didn't hand that paper to the sheriff?" asked Pete.

"No. Too much politics. But since they've arrested a man for the Bodie murder, I have written to the district attorney, offering to appear as a witness, and also offering to present Wolf's confession to the court. I didn't want to let that slip of paper out of my possession. Such documents have a habit of disappearing when politics are involved."

Pete nodded. He understood. Bodie had been a State senator, and some of his political enemies had paid Jim Wolf to put him out of the way.

"I'm sure glad you got that paper," said Pete. "But suppose something was to happen to you?"

"I've taken care of that." The doctor hesitated, studying Pete's face. "Wolf's confession is hidden under the lining of my instrument case. The edges of the lining are pasted down. If anything should happen to me, perhaps

you would see to it that the confession is mailed to the district attorney. His name and address are written on the envelope holding the confession."

"I'll send it if anything happens," said Pete, heading for the door. "Well, so long, Doc. The I X L foreman is comin' in tomorrow. If I can get a job, you'll see me plenty."

Pete did some hard thinking as he crossed the square. Tascosa was a safe town, so small that he could keep track of any stranger entering or leaving. About the only visitors to Tascosa were the cowboys from the two big cattle ranges.

It occurred to Pete that perhaps the doctor had deliberately chosen Tascosa for these reasons rather than because he couldn't make a living in Tecolote. Yet the doctor was no coward.

Pete slowed up and stood idly looking at a Mexican baby playing in the dirt. Dent! Why had Dent stopped the doctor from going to see Jim Wolf? It had occurred to Pete that Dent might have had a hand in the killing of Wolf and hadn't wanted Hapgood to get to him for fear Wolf might talk.

As Pete entered the store and bought crackers and beer, Dave Hamill signaled to him to step toward the back of the building.

The back door opened on the plains and afforded a wide outlook.

"While you were chinning with the doc," said Dave, "a tough-looking fella rode in, bought some makings and asked questions. Wanted to know if there was a doctor located here. The stranger kept looking hard at your horse tied alongside mine."

"This fella, what was he like?" Pete asked.

"Kind of reddish, curly hair, tough face, about your size but a lot heavier."

"Where did he head for?"

"That's the funny part of it. He asked if there was a doctor here, but he didn't go to the doc's office. Just stepped up on his horse and rode off."

Pete mused for a while. "You in any hurry to get back to your outfit?"

"Shucks, no! I'm here till you see the foreman. Why?"

"Let's tie our horses somewhere out of sight."

Pete and Dave Hamill were sitting in the back doorway of the store, munching crackers and drinking bottled beer when two men came into view riding slowly toward town.

"Couple of I X L hands?" Pete asked.

"I dunno," replied Dave.

The two strangers rode into the plaza and dismounted in front of the doctor's office.

Dave Hamill, who had stepped to the front of the store, came back to Pete.

"They have went in there," he said. "Now they're talkin' with the red-headed doctor."

Pete rose and brushed cracker crumbs from his shirt. With a handful of crackers he sauntered over to the doctor's office. The man standing outside was Dent. Munching a cracker, Pete paused and stood looking into the office.

"Doc's busy," said Dent.

Pete nodded and strolled on. He stopped and spoke to a Mexican woman in Spanish. She laughed at his joke. For a minute or two they stood chatting like old friends. Pete sauntered on. In the glimpse he had managed to get of the inside of the office he had recognized Slattery as the man talking with the doctor.

"How does she lay?" asked Dave Hamill as Pete returned.

"Not so good. I know those two fellas, but they haven't caught on to who I am yet. They're Dent and Slattery. I tangled with 'em once in Tecolote. The doc don't know 'em. If they recognize me, they'll start shootin' and the doc might get hurt. I got to put him wise, somehow."

"I'll side you," offered Dave Hamill.

"With that busted wing? No, you better keep out of it."

Pete borrowed pencil and paper and wrote a few words. He sauntered back to the doctor's office.

"What do you want?" said Dent, staring hard at Pete.

"I see the doctor." Pete spoke in Spanish.

Slaterry, standing just within the doorway, also gave Pete a sharp glance, but failed to recognize him.

"Hello!" said the doctor, glancing up from packing his instrument case in his saddle-bags. "What can I do for you?"

"This medicine you give me is no good," said Pete, still speaking in Spanish. "My woman is sick—bad. It is that you will come and give her some good medicine?"

The red-headed doctor shook his head. He didn't know what Pete was driving at, but he played his hand as though he did.

"No. Sorry. I've got to go over to the Bend to patch up a man who's been injured pretty badly. Got to go right away. Tomorrow I'll try to see your wife."

"Good!" said Pete. He handed the slip of paper to the doctor. "This medicine is no good," he reiterated.

The doctor glanced at the slip. He read:

Watch out! Don't leave town.

He crumpled the paper and tossed it into a corner.

"All right," he said to Pete. "We'll try something else."

Pete shuffled out and again crossed the plaza.

"I've seen that Mexican somewhere before," said Slaterry.

"Them shepherders all look alike," said Dent. "We're ready, any time you are, Doc."

Doctor Hapgood had red hair, and blood of the same hue. *Don't leave town!* the slip had read. Evidently Pete knew who the strangers were and why they had come. Hapgood gazed at Slaterry. He had never seen the man before, but he didn't need to be told what kind of a man he was.

Dent, standing in the doorway, raised his hand and pushed back his hat.

"It ain't so far but that you can't get back this evenin'," he said.

The doctor stared at the long, blue scar on the back of Dent's hand. Now he had it! It was the man who had held him up in Andreas Canyon!

Resentment turned the doctor's face crimson.

"I've changed my mind about going to see your sick friend," he said quietly.

"How's that, doc?" Slattery's tone was natural enough but his eyes suddenly had grown dangerous.

"There's no 'how's that' about it. I won't be able to go with you."

"Better think it over," Slattery threatened.

The doctor's patience boiled over. "No need. It's settled."

The man in the doorway straightened, turned and stepped into the office.

"You'll go!" he snarled, covering the doctor with his gun. "You'll go right now!"

From the store doorway Pete had seen Dent step into the office. Pete grabbed up an unopened bottle of beer. It was warm. He shook it and started across the plaza.

"What you up to now?" Dave asked, following him.

Pete stopped at the doorway of the doctor's office. "I come back," he whined. "My woman——"

"Get to hell out of here!" Dent yelled as he whirled round.

Pete swayed as though he were drunk. "Have some beer?" he said with drunken geniality, pressing the old-fashioned beer-stopper.

Dent threw up his arm as the warm beer spurted in his face. Pete dropped the bottle and went for his gun. Slattery, firing over Dent's shoulder, missed Pete. The shot went whining across the plaza.

"Young Pete!" cried Dent.

"You got that straight!" said Pete, and fired. The shot took Dent in the stomach. Dent caved in and fell across the doorway.

The doctor grabbed Slattery's arm, but Slattery broke

loose and, jumping over Dent's body, dashed out into the plaza. At the sound of the shooting a Mexican woman ran out, screaming. She came between Slattery and Young Pete, who dared not fire for fear of hitting her. Slattery grabbed her and held her in front of him. She was fat and heavy. She screamed and fought. In the struggle she broke away. Slattery's gun was knocked from his hand.

The woman dashed into a doorway.

"I turned you loose once, Slattery, and I paid for it," Pete said. "Pick up your gun!"

Instead Slattery put up his hands.

"Pick up your gun! Afraid of a sheepherder, Slattery?"

A Winchester in his hands, the storekeeper came out into the plaza.

"My party," said Pete. "Just leave him alone." And Pete holstered his gun.

"How many notches in your gun, Slattery?" Pete demanded, trying to get the outlaw to fight. "Pick it up." Pete spread out his hands. "Show me how fast you are, Slattery."

Dave Hamill, on the store veranda, cursed Pete for a fool. But Pete stood idly watching the man who had ambushed him, waiting for him to take up his gun and fight.

"Guess you're licked," said Pete, turning his back on Slattery and starting across the plaza.

Dave Hamill's shrill cry of warning was unnecessary. Slattery had jumped forward, grabbed up his gun and was throwing down on Pete. But Pete was too quick for him. Whirling, Young Pete loosed a shot. Slattery flung up his arms and pitched forward. Before he hit the ground Pete had fired again. Slattery was dead before Doctor Hapgood got to him. . . .

Long, sunset shadows lay across the plaza. A group of Mexicans stood looking at the bodies of the two dead outlaws on the store veranda.

The doctor came from the store, followed by Pete and Dave Hamill.

"I know they are Dent and Slattery," Pete was saying.

"I ought to. This is the second time I tangled with 'em."

"Dent and Slattery are the names Jim Wolf gave me as having shot him," said the doctor, musingly.

"That's why Dent didn't want you to get to Wolf before he cashed in," said Pete.

Doctor Hapgood nodded. "I won't have to worry about that confession now." He drew a slip of paper from his notebook and penciled a few words on it and handed it to Pete.

"More medicine?" asked Pete.

"Good medicine," said the doctor.

Pete glanced at the slip of paper. It was a bill against Young Pete, for twenty-five dollars, signed "J. V. Hapgood, M. D.," and it was marked, "Paid in full."

THE CONTEST MAN

by ALAN
LEMAY



*Joe Gill had pride—
and the heart
to go with it*

“WHACK-EAR” BANKS pulled the collar of his sheepskin coat up around his big tousled head, and lighted a crooked cigarette. The brisk wind, sweeping down with the dusk from the northern ranges, tore a trailing fire of sparks from the cigarette, and sent them swirling on the warpath into oblivion.

“Speakin’ of untoward an’ nonparalleled circumstances,” said he, “did yuh see the nifty-dressed feller that rode up just as we was finishin’ supper?” He peered quizzically through the chill twilight at the other punchers of the Triangle R.

“What’s nonparallel about a man on a horse?” asked “Dixie” Kane, the slender bronc-peeler.

“This feller,” said Whack-Ear, “wears the killin’est clothes I ever see straddlin’ a mortal horse. He’s got a hat weighin’ pretty near as much as a saddle, with carved pictures on it. His chaps must have absorbed anyways six of the loudest-colored pinto goats that ever said ‘blat’;

an' his vest has bead flowers, an' embroidery, an' do-fix-in's on, until his life sure ain't goin' to be safe anywheres in the neighborhood of a Injun buck. His belt is about six inches wide, an' his shirt is purple silk, an' his handkerchief is red silk, an' though I can't say for sure, I'll lay anybody that his underwear is green silk, just to make the rainbow complete.

"An', mind yuh, all these fixin's is draped on just one feller—just a medium-sized feller, an' him about twenty pounds under weight, at that!"

"Gosh darn," said Dixie.

And rich, bubbling chuckles came from "Mournful" Andrews, the round, moon-faced cowboy with the merry eyes, like willing applause.

Whack-Ear Banks drew his huge frame up and shifted his seat, poising himself for the delivery of his big sensation.

"This handsome feller and his clothes admit open an' outright that they never been on a ranch before! Not a cow ranch, or a horse ranch, or a dog ranch, or not even a—low-down sheep ranch—not in his whole life."

The merry, round face of Mournful Andrews cracked from ear to ear, and a brisk cannonade of irrepressible chuckles burst from him, trailing off into deep rumblings in his barrel-like chest.

"A tenderfoot," breathed Dixie Kane, not without a certain ecstatic anticipation.

"Yes an' no," said Whack-Ear. "To some extent, but yet not altogether an' exactly. Of course Old Man Rutherford demands to know just how the —— he expects to do winter ridin' for the Triangle R with nothin' in his favor but a suit of mail-order clothes. So this feller goes to work an' takes down his suitcase, an' gets out—"

"Suitcase?" demanded Dixie Kane.

"I said suitcase," Whack-Ear affirmed.

"'Scuse me for buttin' in," said Mournful, "but did the horse likewise have window curtains on?"

"Out of the suitcase," Whack-Ear pursued, "he gets

out a silver cup close to a foot high, with a statue of a kettlin' horse plastered to one side; an' a string of medals with his name carved on, which same he allows is Joe Gill. An' he mentions that he's a contest hand, and well and favorably known in the parts where the boys ride for the grandstand and to —— with the stock."

It took several moments for them to digest this.

"I used to be a contest hand," said Dixie Kane, with the air of a man who has been through it all. Dixie had recently become twenty-one years old.

"With all due regard," said Whack-Ear, "for the handsome efforts of Dixie, the time he got throwed so far an' high at Cheyenne——"

"My foot slipped," flared Dixie. "I could o' rode that sorrel till his tongue hung out pretty near to his knees, an' well the judges knew it, too!"

"Dixie's spectacular an' record-breakin' high dive aside," continued Whack-Ear, thrusting ham-like fists deeper into the pockets of his sheepskin, "I never had much use for contest hands. I like the boys that'll work right out in the mud with the cows, cattle bein' the main feature in the cattle business, to my mind. These grandstand fellers have got the idee that just because we wear overalls, an' don't bother to throw down every cow we see with our bare hands, that we don't know anythin' about ridin' an' such. An' as fer me," and here a twinkle appeared in Whack-Ear's grave eyes, "I dunno but what I'm willin' to leave this feller show us how to handle some of the more difficult an' particular parts of the work—seein' 's he's got medals an' such provin' he's so good."

"To start off with," opined Dixie, rumpling his sandy hair, "I figure the boy should have a real hand-picked string, includin' a few of the kind o' cayuses he's used to ridin' as a regular thing. Start off with Long Sweet for top horse; an' Cricket maybe, an' that buckskin that Charlie Decatur spoiled, the time the buckskin pretty nigh spoiled him."

"I'll just let him have Krag off o' my string," offered Mournful. "I'm not selfish!"

"You see," said Whack-Ear Banks the following day, as he threw down the heavily frosted bars of the breaking-corral gate, "the Old Man says to me, 'Give Mr. Gill a string o' quiet stock,' says he, an' I sure done like he said. Of course, if these horses is *too* quiet for you, I wouldn't be surprised if you might be able to swap off with some o' the other boys, for ponies a little more lively an' willin'."

"Quiet riding will suit me," said Joe Gill.

In spite of the eye-stunning flash of his contest clothes, the new hand presented the general appearance of a rather backward and unassuming man. He was of slender and youthful build, and beneath the cockily worn ten-pound hat his blue eyes were mild and unaggressive.

Whack-Ear noted with a touch of scorn that the contest rider's face appeared almost pallid, in contrast with the coppery leather visages of the other men.

"Your horses and Dixie Kane's are in this little corral here," said he. "Dixie likes quiet horses too."

Dixie had roped his bay gelding, Shot, and was already saddling.

"Which would you say was the quietest?" asked Joe Gill, when Whack-Ear had pointed out the eight or nine reprobates that were to compose his string.

"Well," pondered Whack-Ear, "some say Baby Face but I say Long Sweet—that maple-sugar pony over there."

Joe Gill stepped toward the clustered horses on the far side of the corral, shaking out his noose. A perfectly formed loop settled lightly over Long Sweet's head, and gently drew snug. Joe saddled expertly, tying the latigo strap with swift finesse.

"He's just a little uneasy about mountin'," offered Dixie Kane. "I'll just steady him while you climb up."

Dixie held Long Sweet by bridle and one ear while Joe Gill placed one hand on the pommel and vaulted neatly into the saddle. Things happened.

Dixie Kane leaped back as Long Sweet went violently into the air. The astonished contest rider had hardly

touched the saddle when he found himself flung high out of the leather. When Joe Gill next touched the horse he was no longer in the saddle at all, but behind the saddle's cantle, astride the hunching loins. He grabbed the cantle with both hands, the split reins flying loose and free.

"Hey!" yelled Mournful Andrews. "Farther forward. That ain't the place to sit! Oh, ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The other punchers snickered, but the melon-shaped Mournful Andrews was doubled up with mirth.

Up and down the middle of the corral bucked Long Sweet, coming down vertically on stiffened forelegs in terrific jolts, changing ends, screaming with rage. Then the watching cowboys realized that the unseated rider was not yet thrown. Joe Gill somehow had regained the saddle; they saw him find one lashing stirrup, then the other. He now was riding the battling horse with a close, firm seat.

"Ride him, cowboy," suddenly yelled Whack-Ear Banks. "Stay with him!"

The punchers had forgotten that they were watching a detested contest hand who wore impertinent clothes. The exhibition of game riding pulled them out of themselves, and they whooped.

"Eeyahool!" they yelled. "Ha-a-ang to him!"

Long Sweet was giving the best he had. Joe Gill's spurs were striping his flanks with red at every jump. The horse probably thought that he had backed into a car-load of barbed wire. Long Sweet quit. Fanning the horse along, Joe Gill swept out through the gate and disappeared.

"Not so terrible rotten," adjudged Whack-Ear. "Got over the giggles yet, Mournful?"

"I like to split," said Mournful in a faint weak voice. "I ain't laughed so hard since the time Dixie broke his leg."

"Great hollerin' grief," said Whack-Ear. "If we let this suit of swell clothes get away with stuff like that, he's goin' to be plumb onsufferable."

"Here's the horse he wouldn't of rode," said Dixie from the saddle. "This horse I'm sittin' on right here was the fightin'est fool ever foaled, last spring. He liked to throwed even me."

"He liked to throwed you, did he?" Whack-Ear commented. "I sure would like to see what manner o' leap you'd have to take through the air in order to admit that you was actually throwed!"

"If only," mourned Dixie, ignoring Whack-Ear, "we could get Shot to act like he did then! Maybe a sand bur—"

"I'm all prepared in advance," stated Mournful Andrews. "Just switch this contest hand on to Dixie's horse—an' leave it to me!"

"Dunno but what I'm willin'," Whack-Ear conceded.

There was no time for further conference. Long Sweet now reappeared; Joe Gill, sitting easily in the saddle, seemed to have the situation well in hand.

"How'd you like him?" Whack-Ear called.

"I guess he's goin' to go all right," said Joe Gill lifelessly.

"Still an' all," Whack-Ear went on, "I reckon you've had enough shakin' up for one day."

"I guess maybe I have," said Joe Gill.

"That bein' the case, I figure to give you a different horse now—"

"I guess maybe," said Joe Gill, "I'd rather go right along with Long Sweet. We've reached a kind of understanding."

"The horse I'm giving you," said Whack-Ear firmly, "is one we *know* is quiet. Get down, Dixie. Throw your rig on Dixie's bay, Mr. Gill!"

Without argument the two punchers changed horses and saddles. Joe Gill mounted Dixie Kane's Shot with a certain air of introspection, but Shot stood quietly. When Gill had neck-reined Shot in a close figure eight he began to look happier.

"Wait—your saddle blanket's folded under," exclaimed Mournful, stepping quickly to the flank of Joe Gill's

horse. Dexterously he slid a hand under Shot's saddle blanket, as if to smooth the folds; casually he moved away again, shoving his hands back into his pockets.

Fifteen seconds passed, thirty seconds, a quarter of a minute more—

With a squealing snort the bay gelding blew up. If Long Sweet had given a good sample of how hard a cayuse can fight, Shot now gave an imitation of a wildcat gone mad. He pivoted, he sunfished, he bawled. He changed ends in mid-air. And, when these things failed, he flung himself through the air, crashed down any old way on neck and shoulders, and rolled. Joe Gill flung himself clear, and was in the saddle as the horse struggled up.

A horse can not go on like that forever; and presently the effects of Mournful Andrews' "perscription" began to wear off. At last Shot stood still, temporarily whipped.

Joe Gill swung down slowly, and sopped a handkerchief at his bleeding nose. Then he ran a hand under the saddle blanket. Finding nothing, he smelled his gloved hand.

"Carbon bisulfide, huh?" he said looking Mournful Andrews in the eye.

"I dunno," said Mournful Andrews frankly.

"Is this weak-kneed old plug the toughest horse you got?" Joe Gill demanded, turning to Whack-Ear.

"Yes," admitted Whack-Ear, scratching his head.

"I came here for a rest," said Joe Gill, "but I gotta find *some* excitement round here, and I guess maybe I'll start in by knockin' most of the sawdust out of this fat boy with the schoolgirl giggles."

Wobbling a little on his legs, Joe Gill advanced upon Mournful Andrews, and swung a well meant left at Mournful's jaw. Mournful ducked and side-stepped; and Joe Gill, lurching forward, collapsed to his hands and knees. For a moment it seemed as if he were not going to be able to rise, and Dixie Kane stepped forward to give him a hand.

"Keep your paws off me," snarled the contest man. He

got to his feet unassisted, and strode with fair steadiness toward the bunkhouse.

"I guess he's quittin'," said Dixie Kane.

"Quittin'?" repeated Whack-Ear. "Him? He don't know how. What become of your bad horse, Dixie? The one that you had such a big bother with last spring?"

For a moment Dixie stood silent, a baleful light in his eyes. "No grandstand hand can hang a thing like this on me!" he said at last. "I'll show that cheap circus tin-horn one or two things about this cow business yet." He turned and strode off.

"Did yuh see the look on Dixie's face?" laughed Mournful. "Oh, gee-hee-hee!"

"Where do you get a snicker out o' this?" Whack-Ear demanded. "Seems to me if I was called a fat boy with giggles, I'd sing kind o' small!"

Sticking his hands in his pockets, Mournful Andrews walked off after Dixie Kane.

"Old Man" Rutherford sat, a big, gaunt figure with a granite face, in the combined living room and office of his log cottage. He wore overalls and loose pull-off boots, and a flannel shirt open at the throat. The years were beginning to tell on the Old Man. His shock of hair was now an iron gray, his lean, rocky face was beginning to show a few deep-creased lines, but his keen, level gray eyes retained a surprising amount of the enthusiasm of youth.

"Dixie," said Old Man Rutherford to the young bronc-peeler who stood before him, "in a good many ways you aren't much good."

Dixie Kane slowly reddened beneath his tan, and his eyes shifted nervously from the level gray gaze of the Old Man.

"I'm a rider," he replied with resentment. "I never claimed to be anythin' different! An' if my ridin' ain't givin' satisfaction—"

"Time's come," Rutherford said, "when I got to make a development out at Lobo Springs. I got timber cut an' seasoned, an' lyin' there in stacks—enough to put up a

good bunkhouse, an' cook shack, an' a stable. I got hay, some, an' more is on the way.

"I figger to put ■ man there to run that show an' build it up with his own hands, an' stick with it. The cattle business is changin' some, Dixie. Seems like we're goin' to have to be a little closer organized than the way we used to do. The man that shows me he can take hold of a bunch o' nothin' an' do somethin' with it, he's goin' to be permanent foreman out there, with a interest in the stock, bimeby. You ain't near so good as yuh think, but I'm willin' yuh should show me yuh are. An' if yuh want to try a hard winter at Lobo Springs, I'll put yuh there, an' give yuh two riders—no cook—an' a couple o' hay shovelers when they're needed."

Dixie Kane pondered. "Mister Rutherford," said he uncertainly, "I sure don't know what to say."

"Then that's settled. An' don't go bustin' in down at the bunkhouse shoutin' that you're now a foreman, either. I'll give yuh Mournful Andrews to start, an' Joe Gill, this contest man, for the other rider."

Doubt clouded Dixie's brow. "Mister Rutherford, I dunno as I can do anythin' with that Joe Gill. He's the stuck-upest, no-count hand."

"Talk loud, does he?"

"Well, he don't exactly talk—"

"If he gets funny, lick him. If he's like I think, it'll make a friend out o' him."

"I can lick him," said Dixie, "but there's a feller that ain't goin' to stay licked. He'll always come 'unlicked,' as 'Whiskers' says."

"I got no one else for yuh," said the Old Man. "Try workin' his legs off him. Set him such an awful pace. Show him you're the better man."

Dixie Kane considered this, and a certain gleam came into his eyes. "Reckon that's worth tryin'," he agreed. . . .

Mournful Andrews strode with a swinging swagger from the makeshift corral to the little bog shack that was the only building at Lobo Springs. He kicked the door

open with a merry whoop, stepped inside, and shut the door with a back-swing of his heel. Then, abruptly, his manner changed. "Good goshamighty," he whimpered, "I never see the like."

He hobbled stiffly and painfully to the nearest bunk, and very tenderly eased himself down upon the softest part of it. His plump face drooped in lines of sagging weariness.

"Yuh look like yuh rode some," hazarded Dixie Kane.

"Rode?" repeated Mournful, with a faint moan. "I never pounded leather more consistent in one day in my life. And that after stayin' out till pretty near mornin' last night!"

"Is he weakenin' any, Mournful?" asked Dixie, eying his partner intently.

"Weakenin'? Oh, my!" replied Mournful almost tearfully. "Two-three hours ago I says, 'Guess we better start back,' an' he says, 'Why, it won't be dark for three hours yet!' I says, 'Well, we got to save the horses.' 'Oh,' says he, 'I thought we'd prob'ly ride back after dark, like we done yesterday!'"

"What kind o' feller is this?" marveled Dixie, his face haunted by misgivings.

"Dixie," said Mournful, "he's just plain, cussed obstinate. This pace is pretty near killin' that boy. His pan was white as a sheet when he got down. He had to grab hold of a post to get his balance. When I pulled out them raw sowbelly sandwiches today he was so tired an' sick he could hardly touch 'em."

"How much ground did yuh cover?" asked Dixie, his mind momentarily reverting to the actual accomplishment of work. Mournful told him, and Dixie emitted a low whistle. "And tallied all stock as yuh rode?"

"We done so," said Mournful forcibly. "An' if there's one lone dogie that we missed in that part of our range, he must've buried himself while we passed. This takin' a cow-census separate and apart and followin' the roundup is the biggest fool thing I ever see; and besides, it's impossible!"

"No, it ain't," said Dixie. "The Old Man's right. He has to put his hay where it's needed—an' we already showed his guess is off two thousand head in this camp. And anyway," he added, "how could we show this grandstand hand up if we didn't have no work?"

"The Old Man never actually expected us to make the count. I think he was jokin'. Anyway, he only said to do it if we couldn't think o' nothin' else."

"Just the same," said Dixie doggedly, "it's goin' to help us pull through the stock."

"You sure have changed some," said Mournful wonderingly. Then, "Dixie, Gill is on to our game, if he does act so innercent and acceptin'. He knows as well as you do this ain't no regular siege o' work, this time o' year!"

"What did he say?" Dixie demanded.

"Just one thing. He says, 'I guess Dixie's restin' today,' he says. 'I s'pose he'll take his turn ridin' with me tomorrow!'"

Dixie Kane stared. Then he slammed the coffee pot on to the stove and rubbed his hands on his overalls, as if the pot had been the source of the revolting information.

"Did he say that?" he foamed.

"He done so," Mournful declared.

"Well, that settles it!" Dixie burst out. "From now on I'm goin' to lead this boy through a batch of misery personal. If he's a pig for punishment, I'm a hawg for it, an' if he hangs to *my* coat-tails he'll keep movin' till he drops in his tracks!"

"I ain't quittin'," said Mournful sullenly. "No contest softy is goin' to outdo me, neither. I can show this boy what a whirlwind o' hard work means—an' mebbe I'll show you somethin' too, Dixie, my boy!"

"Start by gettin' us somethin' to eat," suggested Dixie, reaching for his hat. "It ain't too dark to see, yet. I'll show that boy a few things about hand-operatin' a ax!"

Dixie Kane found Joe Gill sitting on a log, his head on his arms, slumped in a posture of utter exhaustion.

The slender contest hand sprang up, however, as Dixie approached.

"Not tired?" asked Dixie Kane, lifting his eyebrows in a simulation of surprise.

"Not me," declared Joe Gill. "I was just thinkin' we might be gettin' in some good work here with the ax."

"My idee exactly," said Dixie. "We got everything we need to go into a first-class bunkhouse, an' we're goin' to rattle these logs right now."

"Fine!" said Joe Gill. He grinned at Dixie broadly—but without warmth.

As the days passed uncounted, Mournful Andrews' face began to lose some of its moonlike rotundity. Another hole had to be put into his belt with the harness punch. But although he now laughed less frequently than before, there were still times when the old familiar chuckles would not be downed.

"Honest, there's times when I pretty near die," he told Dixie Kane one morning as he got breakfast. "Sometimes when I see the expression on your face I pretty near split."

"The layout o' your pan is nothin' to pin a medal on," Dixie Kane retorted obscurely. "Nowadays you go round lookin' like yuh swallowed somebody else's plug o' tobaccy, and was tryin' not to let on."

"What gets me," said Mournful, sobering, "is that he don't seem to weaken, much."

"He is weakenin'," affirmed Dixie.

"He ain't."

"He's losin' weight!"

"He's gainin'!"

"Be that as it may," conceded Dixie grimly, "we been goin' at this thing hind end to. All I can say for this program we been carryin' out is that it sure has changed the look o' the camp, what with the new bunkhouse all ready for the shake roof, an' the corral, an' the temp'ry granary. No three fellers ever did as much work as we done, Mournful."

"When I think of it I'm plumb ashamed," Mournful

agreed. "Me that allus called myself a rider!"

"An' he's worked—don't think he ain't," Dixie went on. "We done these contest hands wrong, Mournful. Grantin' he can't sock a ax home like me, I've seen him hang on when he couldn't hardly get the ax over his head. Next time I start out to race somebody, I ain't goin' to start."

"I ain't licked," said Mournful. "I only just begun. No contest hand can come in here an'—"

"We gone too far to quit," said Dixie. "We've done our best to drop him in his tracks, an' well he knows it. But Mr. Kane has a stunt or two yet. Today we ride."

"Fine!" exclaimed Mournful.

"Don't think Gill will say the same," declared Dixie.

"Nor mebbe you won't, neither, come the end o' the week. It's still too early to look for weak stock, the snow holdin' off this way. So we're goin' after fuzz-tails. An' if so we get some, we'll turn these saddlers loose, an' ride nothin' but the spookiest kind o' stock. An' when I say we're goin' to ride, I mean, in the extremest sense o' the word."

"Goshamighty," said Mournful. "I sure headed into misery when I come here."

"I figure we got two weeks for this at the outside. An' if we don't cork this boy this time, I got to admit that for the present I'm beat."

Joe Gill came in, and abruptly the conversation closed. The slender contest hand wore overalls and sheepskin now. All that remained of his former glory was the heavy hat with the carved leather band still riding cockily atop. The pallor of his face had weathered somewhat by now, but still showed a grayish cast in contrast with the ruddy complexions of the other men. His blue eyes were tired and bloodshot, and there was no basis for Mournful's claim that Joe Gill was gaining weight.

Breakfast was a silent meal. Afterwards, as they saddled, there was a certain suggestion of grim purpose in the movements of Mournful Andrews and Dixie Kane, the determination of men who, having started out to

show another up, find themselves in grave danger of being outgamed.

Joe Gill was the first to mount, and as he mounted, the slow, grinding struggle of wills came abruptly to an end.

As soon as the contest hand had settled into the saddle Long Sweet bucked. It was not the vicious, explosive bucking of an enraged or terrified horse; only the brisk crow-hopping that is conceded to be every cow horse's privilege when the morning is cold. Kane and Andrews proceeded with their saddling, not conceiving Long Sweet's efforts to be worthy of attention. But suddenly they saw Joe Gill slump over the horse's ears to the ground, where he lay as he fell.

Dixie and Mournful exchanged a glance, half of triumph and half of surprise, as they hurried to the fallen man.

"This thing's drawin' to a close," said Dixie Kane.

They straightened out Gill's unconscious form, finding nothing wrong. And presently the prostrate enemy opened his eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked vaguely.

"I don't know, exactly," said Dixie Kane. "Yuh must've fainted or somethin'. Anyway, yuh fell off."

"Feel all right?" asked Mournful, not unkindly, but with a twinkle in his eye.

"I guess so," said Gill.

They helped him up and caught his horse.

"It's the beginnin' o' the end," whispered Dixie to Mournful as they walked away.

He was wrong; it was the end itself.

Gill got one foot into the stirrup, and made as if to mount. Then suddenly the tears sprang into his eyes, and he walked away. Presently the others followed.

They found him lying on his back in his bunk, his face a mask. "Boys," said Joe Gill, "I'm beat. I come into this ranch life too late. I thought I could stick it out, but it can't be done."

"How so?" asked Dixie Kane, looking at Mournful with contentment in his eyes.

"It was that black—at Tucson," said Joe Gill, his voice bitter. "He tried to do for me, he did, and I wish he had."

"What are yuh talkin' about?" demanded Dixie Kane suddenly, his face startled.

"When I got out o' the hospital they told me I wasn't to ride no more. I was to take it easy, so they said."

"Hospital?" repeated Dixie. "When?"

"Just before I came here," said Gill.

Dixie cursed.

"I guess I'll save what ridin' I got left for the rodeos," Gill was saying. "It ain't so much harder, and they pay better there."

But they didn't hear him; they were looking at each other again, but this time in a new way.

"Let me ask just one more thing," said Dixie at last. "What's the reason yuh didn't take the doc's advice an' lay up for a while?"

There was a long silence; until they thought the contest man was not going to reply.

"I got a girl," began Gill finally, "an' I thought— Aw, what's the use? Forget it, Kane!"

"What's the lowest thing in the world?" brooded Dixie Kane presently. He sat on a log behind the new bunk-house that had cost so much in nerve and sweat, his gloved fingers idly tearing up wisps of straw. "I want to go tell it that it's been promoted one step up. If there's anythin' as slimy low an' yaller mean as me, I want to know its name. I wish I was dead!"

His comments ended in an embittered series of blasphemous remarks.

For a moment a shadow of the old twinkle appeared in Mournful Andrews' face. "When I seen the change come over your face, I pretty near—" he began, but his voice trailed off. "You an' me both," he concluded in a different key.

Dixie got up, walked listlessly to his horse, and mounted.

"Where yuh goin'?" asked Mournful Andrews.

"Do some work, I guess," said Dixie without expression.

Mournful hesitated, then walked to his own horse, and followed Dixie's example. Dixie guided his horse away from the buildings, his eyes avoiding the bunkhouse as self-consciously as if its rough-hewn logs had formed an accusing face. Then the jogging of his horse brought him to life, and his disgust with himself exploded into volcanic wrath. It was the horse that paid for that. Dixie's quirt slashed the animal's flank.

"Leave here!" snarled the man.

It was two hours later when the two men returned to Lobo Springs. They came in at a walk, Dixie already ashamed of his manner of relieving his own temper at the expense of his mount. Dixie dismounted before the bunkhouse, threw the reins over his horse's head, and strode toward the door with calm steadiness and decision in his eye.

"Joe!" began Dixie, throwing open the door.

Joe Gill was gone. So, they found, was his war bag, his saddle, and his horse.

Old Man Rutherford bent over a sheet of paper, intent on columns of figures which he revised and tinkered at with a long pencil which he occasionally wet in his mouth. His left hand gripped a handful of his gray-ing hair. Thus anchored, the hand looked less as if it were supporting the big head than as if it were holding the head down to its distasteful work. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" yelled the Old Man.

Joe Gill entered, hesitantly. As if on second thought, he stepped back to park his hat on the porch outside the door; then came in and closed the door after him.

"Oh, hello, Gill," said Rutherford. "Come after supplies?"

"Why," said Gill, "I thought I'd draw—"

"Gill," said Old Man Rutherford, "I ain't much to pass out flatterin' remarks. But when I heard from Whack-Ear how much you boys got done at Lobo Springs,

I swear yuh could have knocked me over with a medjum-sized ax. I had no idee you boys would actually count the cattle. I figgered you'd be too busy playin' seven up to get to a thing like that. An' when it comes to three riders buildin' a bunkhouse, an' a granary, an' a corral—actually usin' axes—I swear it plumb passes beyond belief."

"Yeah?" said Joe Gill. "Well, I guess I'll draw my pay an' quit."

"Quit?" repeated Rutherford. "From what I'd heard, I'd kind o' gathered that yuh wasn't the quittin' kind. What's the matter now?"

"I know when I'm beat," said Gill stoically. "I'm quittin'—while I still can."

Rutherford looked at him for a moment, his eyes showing just the faintest trace of contempt. "Suit yourself," he said, and reached for his check book.

There was another brief knock at the door. But before the Old Man could answer it, the door swung open to admit Dixie Kane. The bronc-peeler stopped with a shock as he sighted Joe Gill; then took a fresh grip upon himself and came forward more slowly.

"I see one of your riders is quittin', Dixie," said the Old Man. "Leavin' Lobo Springs."

Dixie Kane glanced at Joe Gill. "No, he ain't," he said shortly. "It's *me* that's through at the Springs!"

Rutherford threw down the check book with a slap. "Seems to be catchin'," he exploded. "You've been with me since yuh had to be lifted into the saddle, an' I never before seen yuh quit when there was somethin' tough to be done!"

"I'm quittin' now," said Dixie, fiddling with his hat.

"I'm danged if yuh are!" boomed the Old Man. "What's the idee? This here's a real opportunity for yuh. It gives yuh more pay, an' a interest in some stock. It gives yuh a chance to make good! It'll learn yuh more about the cattle business than plain an' fancy ridin' could ever do, an' leads up to makin' a cattle man of yuh in the end!"

"Ain't fitted," said Dixie.

"You're better fitted than any three men I ever see! Tallyin' cattle, an' puttin' up buildin's, an'—"

"I've got somethin' to tell yuh," said Dixie. "Mournful an' me done all that extra work just to cork Joe. We've worked day an' night, with just that one thing in mind—to kill off that man, with bad horses, an' pore grub an'—"

"An' you're lettin' 'em *do* it?" Old Man Rutherford demanded of Joe.

"Listen!" snapped Dixie Kane, in a voice that made the Old Man start with surprise. "Joe Gill was done up by a killer at the Tucson rodeo. He come here straight from the hospital, with the doc's orders to never ride again. D'yuh see what I done?"

"Joe Gill," said the Old Man in his deep voice, "is that statement correct?"

"Give me my pay," begged Joe, "and let me go!"

"You listen to me!" grated Dixie, leaning over the table toward Rutherford. "I'm quittin' in favor of a better man than me. You put me up to workin' him to death, an' now yuh gotta play up same as me. An' if yuh ain't got enough sense to—"

"Whoa up!" said Rutherford. "I'll run this show! But this time you're right. Yep. Gill, you'll have a crack at runnin' Lobo Springs. An' if yuh don't know much to start, I reckon this is where you'll sure learn!"

"No," said Gill.

"What?"

"I don't take anybody's charity," said Joe.

Rutherford rose up, towering behind his table, and his voice rose to a mighty roar.

"I won't have my plans upset by no notions of a lot o' young squirts!" he bellowed. "When I say somethin', it sticks! Joe, you get out o' here, an' take the day to rest up. An' see that tomorrow mornin' finds yuh on the way to Lobo Springs!"

"I guess I'd rather—" Joe Gill began.

"Get out!" thundered Rutherford.

Gill went.



*A death trap brings two
feuding friends together*

FAT MAN IN A BROWN DERBY

by
**WILLIAM
MACLEOD
RAINE**

CCLINT LENNON and his foreman, Pete Sanders, tied at the hitch-rack in front of the hotel. Clint had come to Wagon Gap to meet a cattle buyer. He had not been in the town for three years, only once since his marriage, and he did not intend to stay long. For this was Jake Hillman's hangout when he was away from the ranch, and though he and Jake were now enemies he did not want any difficulty with him. They had been close friends once, before Clint took from him and married the girl with whom he was in love.

Bess Lennon had begged her husband not to go to Wagon Gap. She knew that if Jake heard Clint was there, Jake would accept this as a challenge. But Clint felt he had to go. He lived by the code of the Old West. A man could not stay away from a place where he had business because he was afraid.

After they had washed and brushed off the dust of their

long ride, the boss of the Circle CL and his foreman left the hotel to go their respective ways. Pete's mother lived at Wagon Gap, and he wanted to see her. His employer headed for the stockyards down by the railroad tracks, where the buyer, Rogers, had left word he could be found.

Clint was a medium-size man, tough as leather and as wiry as a wild cat. He strode down Front Street jauntily but warily. That Hillman would not kill him without warning he knew, but in the course of his thirty-two reckless years he had made a good many enemies. A positive character, blunt, forthright, and devil-may-care, he had gone the way of the strong, rarely pulling his punches. Outlaws and crooks had suffered from the driving force with which he had fought them. He was no gunman, but in him was the tough fiber that was bringing law and order to the West.

Rogers was at the pens looking over the Circle CL stock Clint's riders had driven to town. They were fat and sleek, a prime bunch with no culls in it. The objections offered by the buyer were perfunctory, made in the hope of getting a slight cut in price. As soon as he had checked up on the steers he knew he wanted them. From long habit he dickered for a short time, but in five minutes the deal had been made.

The two men separated at the bank. As Clint walked back to the hotel he decided to stay in his room and write some letters he had been postponing. After supper Pete would be back from visiting his people. Early in the morning they could start for the ranch. It was forty-five miles distant, and they could make it by late afternoon.

As he passed the Trail's End four men billowed through the swing doors to the street. Two of them he knew, Bar Meldrum, gambler, and his shadow, Jimmy Drum.

Meldrum pulled up in his stride. He was a big-bodied gross man wearing a Prince Albert coat and a brown derby. His slate-colored eyes were cold and bulbous, expressionless as those of a dead cod. The heavy lids nar-

rowed a little, but the gaze of the gambler did not shift from the cattleman.

"Look who is here, boys," he jeered. "Mr. Clint Lennon, king of Summit County, the big mogul who kicks out anybody he doesn't like."

It had been six years ago that Lennon and Hillman, then close friends, had led in a clean-up of Socorro. The town had been wide open, infested by gamblers, badmen, and lawless women. Meldrum was the leader of the vicious element, but the uprising had sent him on his way. Since then he had found no such rich and easy pickings.

Clint faced the gambler and his supporters with a cool aplomb almost insolent in its contempt.

"Don't blame me, Meldrum, because you're a crook. Count yourself lucky you got off without having to go to the pen. If you hadn't bought off my chief witness you would be behind bars today."

"You can't talk to me that way," Meldrum said thickly, anger churning in him. "In this town I'm as good a man as you. Or that bull-necked Hillman either."

"*I am* talking to you that way." The blue steely eyes of the ranchman bored into those of the gambler. "You never saw the day you were as good a man as Jake Hillman. He is straight and square. You're riff-raff and yellow, crooked as a dog's hind leg. Don't get wrong ideas. Men like you come a dime a dozen."

Clint Lennon waited for no answer but brushed past the man and moved down the street. Meldrum glared after him, the urgent impulse in him to drag out a .38 and fling a bullet into that flat arrogant back. But he did not dare to do it. He knew too well the code of the West. You could not shoot a man while he was not looking, and Lennon had gone his carefree way without once turning his head. He appeared to have dismissed the gambler from his mind.

The cattleman stopped at the hotel desk to get some writing paper. A big, broad-shouldered man was talking with the clerk. Even before he turned, Clint was aware that by ill luck he had walked into Jake Hillman. He

knew that thick brick-red neck patterned with wrinkles, the bowed legs, the heavy voice. They belonged to a man who had once pulled him out of the Canadian when it was in flood.

The harsh voice of Hillman set rigidly. "I told you to keep out of this town," the big man said roughly. "To stay where I wouldn't ever see you again."

Clint said in a low voice, "I had to come on business but I'm leaving tomorrow early."

"You're leaving right now—before sunset," Hillman retorted bluntly, a hard rasp to his voice. "If you're in town when the sun goes down, I'll kill you on sight."

"Don't say that, Jake," implored Lennon. "Don't force me to stay and have trouble with you."

"It goes as I have laid it down," Hillman said heavily. "Get out—or fight."

Lennon answered in a pleading voice that was almost a murmur. "You're forcing me to stay, Jake. I've got no option now. I told you I was going tomorrow. Let it go at that."

"Tonight," Hillman insisted stubbornly. "Like I said—before dark. You've got yore chance to run away if you want it to be that way."

"I can't do that, Jake," replied Clint, sadness in his reluctant voice. "If you won't serve this notice on me, I'll be gone before daybreak."

"I've told you how it's going to be," Hillman cried obstinately, and swung out of the room.

Clint got his key and walked upstairs. He sat on the bed and looked at the floor, his thoughts racing. Knowing how bitter Jake was, he had been a fool to come. This was the last thing in the world he wanted, an ultimatum from the man who had once been for years his best friend. There was no out for him. He could not run away. He had to stay and face Hillman's bullets.

A hundred memories trooped through his mind. They had been boys together, inseparable companions. Knee to knee they had ridden circle on their first roundup, had slept under the same tarp on nights of driving rain. In

town they had shared with each other their last dollar. On long drives to trail-end towns they had swallowed the dust of the same herd. Once when his horse had fallen in a stampede Jake had picked him up just in time to save him from the hoofs of the pounding cattle. And there was the time when they had fought shoulder to shoulder against a bunch of owlhoots at Trinidad.

Clint had been away when Bess Schofield came to the Circle S to visit her uncle. Before he met her, he heard that Jake had fallen in love with this fair-haired girl, and as soon as he saw them together he knew that the big cow-puncher worshiped the slim, dainty young woman and had no chance to win her. She treated him with the same kindness she would have given to a shaggy, friendly Newfoundland dog.

But with Clint and Bess it was different. Before a week had passed they knew they loved each other deeply. The situation was difficult. Clint and Jake were sidekicks, closer than most brothers. It would be impossible to explain to Jake that in any case he had no chance and that what had happened to Clint and Bess had swept them unexpectedly and overwhelmingly. His friend would see him as a traitor.

So it had proved. Hillman had managed to control his swift and passionate temper sufficiently to escape from forcing on the other a gun fight. He had moved out of the district with a warning that if they ever met again there would be trouble.

Now it had come. Clint could not avoid it. He had to kill or be killed, and he had no grudge against Jake, no hatred at all, only a yearning tenderness for the old days and a pity for the hurt that had been dealt him. But there was no use thinking about slipping out of town. Jake had made his threat before witnesses.

He had to stay, and he had to show himself on the main street after nightfall. One chance he gave himself. He would walk leisurely down one side of Front Street and back on the other. If he missed meeting Jake, he would remain in his room until he left in the morning.

Pete Sanders did not show up at the hotel for supper. Probably he had stayed with his mother to get some of her good fried chicken and biscuits. Clint ate alone, a sparse meal. He had read of the last breakfast of condemned men about to be executed. His appetite had deserted him. He knew now something of what they must have felt.

When he left the hotel, he carried no gun with him. Since he had made up his mind not to kill Jake, a gun would do him no good. The hotel was in the outskirts of Wagon Gap, on a back street that ran parallel to Front. Clint walked along this street and moved through the weeds of a vacant lot to the business district.

From a hurdy-gurdy there came to him the sounds of a fiddle, of a dance-caller's high-pitched voice, and of shuffling feet. To his mind there jumped the picture of a dance hall Jake and he had visited the first night they reached Dodge after a long trail drive. He shook this out of his thoughts. This was no time to be thinking of such things.

He passed saloons, gambling halls, and closed business houses. Presently he reached the courthouse square. He walked around it and started back on the other side of Front Street. Several times he met men, singly or in small clumps. Some of them eyed him curiously. Of course, the word had spread that Hillman had ordered him out of town. They were no doubt speculating as to what would happen when he met Jake.

But he passed out of the lights of Front Street into the darkness of the night without having met Hillman. Again he waded through the weeds. In front of him, perhaps three hundred yards away, he saw the lighted porch of the hotel.

The sound of a shot whipped past him, startling the night. Before the echo of it had died down there came the crash of more guns. Clint moved forward, cautiously. Out of the darkness a man staggered. From his lax hand a revolver dropped. He seemed to stumble over his own feet and went down. The man was Jake Hillman.

Someone cried exultantly, "I got him, Bar."

Meldrum's thick voice answered, "Good work, Jimmy. We'll make sure."

Shadowy shapes emerged from the gloom.

Moving fast, Clint covered the distance between him and Hillman. He needed no explanation of what was taking place. Jake had been ambushed by Meldrum and his gang. They were about to make certain that they had done a good job.

"Keep back, you killers," Clint warned, standing astride the prone body.

Impressions registered with him lightning fast. A rumor of running feet in the distance. A weak astonished cry of recognition from Jake. Meldrum running up, almost within arm's reach, and an instant later Jimmy Drum and another beside him.

"So it's you, buttin' in again," Meldrum snarled.

The gambler's revolver jerked up into position. Clint dived at him. The .45 roared, not six inches from his ear. A weight crashed down on his head and set a hundred hammers beating in it. As he pitched to the ground, he felt as if his skull were exploding.

He regained consciousness to find himself lolling in a chair. His hands were tied behind him. A single electric bulb illuminated the small bare room. Meldrum faced him, the brown derby set on the back of his head. He stood with his feet apart, hands thrust into trousers pockets.

"So here we are, Mr. Lennon, a nice, exclusive, friendly little party," he jeered, cruel malignity in his cold, prominent eyes.

Lennon did not answer. His mind was busy orienting himself. This was, he guessed, a room built on a landing pier at the edge of the river. He could hear the swish of water sucking at the piles supporting the wharf. It was not a pleasant sound to listen to just now. The swirling current, lapping at the upright logs, reminded him of some monster licking its chops before a meal.

"I've waited quite a while to settle our little account,"

Meldrum went on, "but I never expected anything as good as this." The heavy lids of the gambler narrowed a trifle. The dead eyes between them had come to life. They glittered triumphantly. "First Hillman, then you—in the same gather. You might say that this was made to order for me, Mr. Lennon."

Clint sat astride a chair, the high heels below the corduroy trousers clamped to the rungs of the chair as though they were stirrups. A rope around his body tied him loosely to the back. He was in the tightest jam of a life that had often been a dangerous one. He had to think. He had to think fast, to escape being washed down in that racing current outside.

His captor made a gesture with the supple fingers that were so adroit at dealing cards from the bottom.

"The boys wanted to finish you on the spot, Mr. Lennon, but I vetoed that. I wanted you to enjoy it with me. What have you to say before sentence of—er—before sentence is passed on you?"

The stockman knew he was fated for death. Of that he had not the least doubt. He had been spared for the moment in order that Meldrum could play with him as a cat does with a mouse.

"How about a little drink first?" he suggested.

His voice was even and cool, almost casual. No fear looked out of the level blue-gray eyes. Clint was a tough proposition, a native of the gaunt desert which breeds only hardy products.

The big man in the brown derby laughed harshly. His body shook with the heartiness of his mirth, but there was no warmth in his slatey eyes.

"Run, Jimmy," he ordered. "Mr. Lennon is going on a long cold journey. We'll start him warm."

Jimmy Drum, chinless and pallid, took a bottle and a glass from the table.

"If you was to ask me, boss," he murmured out of the corner of his mouth, "I'd say the sooner we finish this job the better."

Meldrum ignored the advice. "Hold the glass for Mr.

Lennon," he said. "He's a mite hampered." He poured liquor into a second glass and raised it. "Happy days!" he toasted, with an evil grin.

"Many of 'em," Lennon returned, and drank.

The liquor did not warm him. He did not try to deceive himself. He was doomed.

"A cosy little place you have here," Lennon said evenly. "I suppose you have pulled off more than one of yore neat jobs in this room, Bar."

Clint was talking for time, time to build up an argument, potent enough to save him. And it had to be built on bluff.

"Finish that drink," Meldrum ordered. "Like Jimmy says, the sooner the better."

"I thought you wanted me to give my side of this," Clint suggested.

"If you want to beg for mercy I'll have Jimmy turn you loose."

"Say, let's get through," Drum broke in nervously. "Somebody might come."

Lennon had found his card in the hole. He would play it for all he was worth and his enemy might not know whether it was an ace or a two-spot. He remembered the sound of feet slapping the sidewalk not far from the battlefield. No doubt Meldrum had heard them, too. In order not to be seen, he and his men must have left hurriedly. The memory of those shadowy men in the background gave a ray of hope. How much had they seen? Could they possibly have recognized any of the ambushers?

"I don't blame you, Jimmy," Clint spoke up, his voice cheerful and easy. "You've got yoreself in a tight place sure enough. Like yore boss, who has *his* tail in a crack, too. No wonder you want to light out of here."

A thin smile touched Meldrum's dead-pan face. "So that's your line. We are the ones in trouble?"

"Better not crowd yore luck, Bar," Lennon advised carelessly. "I have friends."

The man in the brown derby asked a derisive ques-

tion. "Did you leave them your present address?" he sneered.

Clint looked at him, apparently surprised. "Why, of course—practically. Pete Sanders is combing this town right now to find you. He'll be along soon."

"Why would Pete be looking for us?" Meldrum asked.

"Why wouldn't he, since he was with me when I ran into you shooting down Hillman?"

"With you." Jimmy Drum's chinless jaw dropped. He cursed softly.

The ruddy color faded from the gambler's face. He too had heard the pad of running feet, though he had been too busy at the time to pay any attention to it. If the hurrying man had been Pete Sanders, and he had recognized any of them, that would mean bad luck later. But maybe Lennon was lying.

"I don't believe Pete was with you," Meldrum blurted.

Clint smiled. "You will—later. I'll give Pete half an hour. You know what he is when he gets started."

"He'll be half an hour too late to save you," Meldrum retorted brutally.

"If you're a fool," Lennon agreed. "You still have a chance to hustle across the border. If I get to him in time, I might shut Pete's mouth. After all, Hillman has been my enemy for several years. He was gunning for me when you got him. I don't owe him a thing."

Meldrum's mind sifted the factors of the situation. He had not seen Sanders at the time of the shooting. Chances were he was not there at all. And yet—for a dozen years Pete had been Lennon's faithful foreman and devoted follower. He had come to town with the cattleman and was registered at the hotel. It was quite likely he would be with him tonight, to make sure that Hillman took no advantage of him in the duel. In fact, it would be queer if he was not beside him.

"You'd say anything for an out," Meldrum growled.

"So I would, if I thought of it." Clint's voice and manner were jaunty. "Maybe I'm lying. Take yore choice. You'll know right soon."

"Even if it's that way, it won't do you any good. Your body will be floating down the river."

"No, I won't be at the hanging. But don't fool yoreself, Meldrum. They'll tie a double murder to you, and you'll hang certain sure. I hope that will be a comfort to Mr. Drum when the guards drag him up to the gallows."

Little beads of perspiration stood out on Drum's clammy forehead. He had not meant to get into anything like this.

"Let's slide out of here while there's time," he said. "We can leave Lennon tied while we drag our loop." Meldrum's slatey eyes watched the cattleman closely. He was worried, even though his expressionless gambler's face did not show it. If Sanders had been with his boss and Meldrum made an end of Lennon, the friends of Clint would hunt him down. They were too powerful for a gang to buck. Very likely they would not even wait for the law to take its course. On the other hand, if his prisoner was lying, the only safe thing to do was to close his mouth for good. The gambler did not bother to consult Drum who, obviously, was on the verge of panic. Meldrum hesitated, still reluctant to give up his revenge.

"You're lying," Meldrum insisted, pushing the brown derby back from the front of his head. "Just throwing out a line. Sanders wasn't anywheres around."

"If you think I'm lying, you're sitting pretty," Clint said, and laughed lightly. "Better toss up a dollar. Heads Pete was there. Tails he wasn't. What do you say, Jimmy."

"I'm pulling stakes right now," Drum answered huskily. "I won't have a thing to do with this."

He started for the door. Meldrum's .45 came out and covered him. "Don't be in a hurry, Jimmy," he warned, in a low voice. "We'll go together, when we go."

"But—" Jimmy's voice was rising to a shriek when his master beat it down.

"Shut your trap, Jimmy. I'll do the talking." Meldrum turned to the man tied to the chair. "What's your proposition?"

"You make one," Lennon said audaciously. "I'm sitting in the driver's seat."

"Nix. I don't believe a word you say."

"You believe it all right. So does Jimmy. He's sweating blood for fear my friends get here before he is gone."

Meldrum shot a contemptuous glance at Jimmy. "You're doing business with me, my friend. If I let you go, how do I know you won't talk? What about Hillman?"

"The gent who was waiting to kill me?"

"Maybe I saved your life. Will you think of that?"

"I'll think of it long enough to give you a chance to get out of the country. I didn't see that fight start. Hillman was a violent fellow. Maybe he began it. I don't know. You had better take a chance on what I will or won't remember. What you want to keep in mind is that if you kill me you hang."

"Hadn't been for me my boys would have left you dead right there in the road beside Hillman."

Clint's faint grin was ironic. "Yes, I know how fond you are of me. You couldn't bear to see them pour lead into me."

"I hate everything about you."

"But I've got you wriggling against the wall with a forked stick against yore throat."

"So you say. Come to the point. How do I know that if I let you go you won't set the dogs on me?"

"You don't. You have to trust me. I'll give you a four-hour start for the border. That gives you a better than fifty-fifty chance to make it. I'm going to tell the truth about what I saw, but I can't prove Hillman didn't start the fracas."

"Give us a six-hour start."

"Four."

"All right. We'll leave you tied up here and gagged. I'll tell you this. If I was playing a lone hand I'd riddle you before I left." The gambler looked at Drum contemptuously. "But a chain isn't any stronger than its weakest link. You win this time, my friend. . . ."

Pete Sanders was lying on a bed reading a newspaper

when Lennon came into the room. "I see by the *Branding Iron* that yore old friend Bar Meldrum has applied for a license to open a gambling hall and saloon here," the foreman said.

"He has changed his mind," the cattleman said. "Left for Mexico tonight. Arizona's loss is Sonora's gain."

Pete squinted a questioning look at his boss. "Say, I've been with my folks all day and don't know a thing. Whatever the news is that you've got, spill it." A moment later he added, excitement in his voice, "What's the matter with yore head? It's caked with blood."

"Kindness of a fat man in a brown derby."

"Say, what is all this?"

"You asked for the news. I sold our stuff to Rogers. Later I met Jake Hillman. He gave me till sunset to leave town."

Pete sat up and clutched the edge of the bed with both hands. "Go on," he said sharply.

"I took a *pasear* through the town tonight. Jake Hillman was killed."

"You got him."

"No. Bar Meldrum got him while he was waiting for me." Clint told the rest of the story in a dozen sentences.

Before he had finished there came a knock on the door. The hotel clerk had brought a message. Jake Hillman was lying wounded at Mrs. Neill's boarding house and he wanted to see Lennon.

"Wounded?" Clint cried. "I thought they killed him before dragging me away."

The clerk looked at him queerly. He did not know who had shot Hillman, but he suspected the man with whom he was talking. "No, Mr. Lennon. Whoever shot him didn't wait to make sure."

Five minutes later Clint was tiptoeing into Jake's bedroom. The wounded man held out a hand. "Shake, boy. Feud is off. You saved me from Meldrum."

A warm glow flooded up in Lennon. He took the offered hand in both of his. There was no need to say anything.



PSYCHOLOGY AND COPPER

*Science has its points in mining,
but you can't beat luck*

by W. C. TUTTLE

“**S**CIENTIFIC prospectin’ has its merits,” announced Ike Harper, as he climbed out of the gopher-hole and sat down beside me on a boulder and filled his pipe, “but fool luck has uncovered more bonanzas than science.

“Now, there was ol’ Jerry Sullivan’s burro that went skatin’ down th’ hill off th’ trail one day and slid th’ coverin’ off th’ Silver Cross, which made uh millionaire outa Jerry. Hen Berry accidentally fired his six-shooter into th’ ground oncet and uncovered one of th’ richest gold veins in th’ State. Yuh can talk science till yer tongue hangs out, but if yuh ain’t lucky yuh never hit it rich. Do yuh happen to know uh elongated person named Magpie Simpkins?”

I replied that I had never had that pleasure.

"Pleasure!" he snorted. "No, I reckon nobody ever did. Let me tell yuh why.

"Magpie was uh scientific prospector. He could take uh piece uh rock and tell yuh jist what it contained and why it contained said constituents. Mineralogy was an open book to that jasper, and because of it he never made uh strike.

"Me and Magpie has these two claims here on Plenty Stone Creek which look promisin', and we're figgerin' that maybe we can git some one to buy us out. Magpie has been down to Piperock after grub, and when he comes back he's got uh proposition.

"I knowed all th' time that we hadn't ought to let uh third party into our outfit, but Magpie argues that uh capitalist like this feller, Peters, will help smooth our trail uh heap, and bein' right on th' ground he can land us uh buyer.

"Peters was uh queer cuss. He was about knee-high to uh tall Injun, and spent his spare time tryin' to cultivate hair on his face. He wore uh little brown derby hat, and it had uh nervous way uh wigglin' around on top of his head when he was talkin'. He didn't have no chin to speak of—jist sort a slid away from his lower lip. He had money and uh thirst fer th' great West, so he comes to Piperock and opens an office—mines and real estate.

"He has six little books on mineralogy which he reads continually; and when uh feller has to consult uh book every time he sees uh piece uh rock, he's in th' same class with th' jasper who opens th' Home Doctor book every time he feels off color—he shore finds symptoms of everything.

"Me and Magpie needs uh grub stake, and bein' as Peters is plumb wild to be uh mine owner, we lets him buy uh third interest in our claims.

"As Magpie remarks, 'He comes uh stranger and we takes him in.'

"I ain't strong fer Peters, but after livin' with Magpie all these years I don't shy at any ordinary freak.

"Now, Magpie has been plumb rational fer several

months, and I'm beginning to think he's sort ■ outgrown his love fer something new in th' scientific line, but I'm wrong, 'cause one day Magpie pilgrims in from Piperock with uh packload uh black-covered books.

"I shore recognizes th' symptoms and goes up to Tellurium Woods' cabin and bunks with him that night. Tellurium is workin' uh copper prospect which he calls th' 'Copper King,' and when I tells him why I'm there, he welcomes me—him and Magpie ain't jist what you'd call friendly.

"Th' next mornin' I sneaks home cautious like. Magpie is oratin' out loud, with nobody to listen except th' pack burros. He quits cold when he sees me and fer th' next few days he surrounds himself with cigarette butts and mystery. About this time Peters makes good. He ain't never been up to see our property but he gits his rope on one Alfred Myron Cowgill, of Boston, Massachusetts, and sends him up to look it over.

"Alfred knows all about mines—havin' been educated fer th' ministry—and he finds out that we've got th' finest piece uh property he ever seen. Copper pyrites shore makes uh hit with people who don't sabe free gold, and after uh little pow-wow, we sells Alfred our prospect hole fer five thousand dollars cash.

"Alfred announces that he's got to go back East fer uh while, and he hires me and Magpie to sort a keep people from pesticatorin' around on his property. We're uh heap obliged to Peters, 'cause this money will make possible uh proposition we've argued uh heap uh times. Old Sourdough Johnson's got uh claim about three miles over th' south fork, which he calls th' 'Daylight,' and me and Magpie have laid awake nights tryin' to figger out how to separate him from his location.

"Johnson ain't on th' lead and never will be where he's workin', but one day we're comin' across th' claim and find th' real lead. Sticks right out in th' middle of th' claim and she shore is rich. Uh course we don't tell anybody—not even Peters. We're folks that mind our own business thataway.

"But Magpie is too much absorbed with his books to even consider uh minin' deal. He sits there half th' night by th' light of uh candle and peruses them books. I'm uh heap curious to know what's in 'em, but won't show it enough to pick one up.

"Somebody tells Tellurium about our sale and he comes down to congratulate us. He's plumb lame with rheumatism, and complains on his affliction uh heap.

" 'What you needs, Tellurium,' remarks Magpie, 'is uh touch of psychology.'

" 'Ain't I got enough?' snaps Tellurium. 'Rheumatics and plumbago and—shucks! I kain't stand much more.'

" 'Mr. Woods, your powers uh perception are limited to sourdough bread and low-grade ore,' states Magpie, markin' th' place in his book. 'Yore ideas of science don't go beyond throwin' uh diamond hitch and th' correct way to hold yer knife when yuh eats pie.' He shakes his finger at Tellurium. 'You ain't got nothin' th' matter with yuh a-tall. It's jist uh lazy streak in yore subconscious mind.'

" 'As I was sayin' before this interruption,' remarks Tellurium, 'as I was sayin', Ike, th' Lord made uh big mistake. It was an error on His part when He wished long ears and uh brayin' voice on uh perfectly innocent jackass, and let some people I know resemble uh human bein'.'

"Tellurium is uh big hulk of uh man, and Magpie ain't what you'd call uh runt; so after watchin' it uh while I pries 'em apart with uh pick-handle. They arbitrates what's left of th' battle and smoke uh peace pipe. When Tellurium hikes back up th' trail home, I notices that his limp is plumb gone.

" 'That's psychology, Ike,' states Magpie. 'He comes down uh cripple and we sends him home whole.'

" 'Laziness covers uh multitude uh sins,' announces Magpie, while we're eatin' supper that night. 'Tellurium states that he's only drivin' uh foot uh day. Now, Ike, no man can ever live long enough to develop uh copper mine at that rate. With th' help of psychology he

can drift three feet uh day in that formation.'

" 'Well, mebbby,' I sort of agrees. 'I don't know th' power of this element yuh claim to have corraled, but I do know Tellurium, and I'm here to state that uh foot uh day is hy-iu driftin' fer him.'

"Magpie peruses his book again some plentiful before he opens up again.

" 'Ike, I'll bet yuh uh hundred dollars that I can have Tellurium drivin' three feet uh day inside of uh week. I aims to sort of work on his imagination through th' elements uh psychology. Enervate his subconscious mind, *sabe?*'

" 'I passes th' *sabe* part,' I replies, 'but I'll take that bet. Yuh might practise on that he-burro now, Magpie. He's been standin' there under that tree since noon. Reckon he's sick or jist lost his appetite?'

" 'Both, I reckon,' replied Magpie. 'But science of th' mind won't help any in his case 'cause he's done ate up yore Sunday overalls and two pair uh yore wool socks.'

"Th' next day I goes down to Granite to have a talk with Peters about this Daylight Mine deal. Me and Magpie had decided not to tell Peters how good it is, 'cause uh *hombre* like him is jist as apt to talk as not. We don't want ourselves to show in th' deal 'cause Johnson might suspect our motives. Uh feller like Peters looks like uh sucker, and mebbby Johnson will make him uh good price.

"Peters swells out his chest and his little derby does uh tango on his head when I puts it up to him. He sure thinks he's an expert. I tells him that it's uh likely lookin' prospect and to shoot th' hull roll if he has to.

"Him bein' some elated I borrows uh hundred from him and goes over to Helena for uh week, leavin' Magpie to his books. I figgers that we can make uh large piece uh money out of th' Daylight without much development work, and I sings uh care-free song while I scatters that hundred amid th' bright lights.

"When I gits back to Piperock th' first person I sees is Magpie, and he welcomes me heartily and also im-

parts th' information that I'm out uh hundred bucks 'cause Tellurium's doin' better than three feet uh day, and his rheumatism is ancient history. Of course, bein' uh direct descendant of one uh Missouri's first settlers, I declines to settle without first-hand information.

"We goes up to Peters's office to find out about th' Daylight deal, but he ain't in, so we goes over to Dutch Fred's and plays seven-up until supper time. Along about dark Peters rides and yells to us that everything is fine. We goes up to his office later, and he's there with uh smile and uh glad hand. He looks almost too danged happy, some way.

" 'Gentlemen,' sez he, 'I'm sorry to have kept yuh waitin' so long, but it was uh hard trip, and as I was in th' mountains several days I was badly in need of my tub. Now to business. I—er—have uh smoke.'

"He shoves out uh box uh seegars and we lights up.

" 'My friends and partners, it's uh lucky thing fer you both that you've got uh technical as well as uh practical mining man fer uh partner in yore ventures—meanin' myself. To th' untaught mind of th' average prospector, that Daylight claim might look promisin'. But I saw its defects, gentlemen, I saw its defects. Remember, I took five days in my examination, and refused to make him an offer.'

" 'But, Peters. We've—' began Magpie.

" 'Beg pardon, Mr. Simpkins, but I'd like to finish. As I said before, I turned th' proposition down, but before I returned I had an inspiration. I decided to investigate other prospects in that particular district. Now, here is where you have me to thank, gentlemen. Yesterday afternoon I ran across uh piece uh property that bids fair to make us all rich. It is located in th' vicinity of yore former property, I believe, and is mighty rich in copper—mighty rich, speaking mildly. I beg yore pardon, Mr. Simpkins, did you speak?'

" 'Go ahead,' mumbles Magpie, and I notices that he's got all of that seegar in his mouth, and seems to be slowly chokin' to death.

“‘As I started to say,’ resumed Peters, ‘I panned some of th’ drillin’s in this prospect and what do you suppose I found, gentlemen? Native copper! Why, in one pan of that dust I got at least half an ounce.’

“He paused to let this sink in. It shore listens good to me, but Magpie don’t seem elated none whatever.

“‘The owner was wise to what he has,’ continued Peters, ‘and when I offered him five thousand for his claim he laughed at me. But I refused to give up the ship, gentlemen, and after talkin’ to him nearly all day I got him to sell us half interest for that price.’

“‘Listen, Peters!’ Magpie’s Adam’s apple is doin’ uh war-dance up and down his neck as he stands there weavin’ on his heels and glarin’ down at Peters. ‘What’s that prospector’s name?’

“‘Mr. Tellurium Woods. Of course, Tellurium is only—’

“‘Yeo-o-o-ow!’ yells Magpie, kickin’ over his chair and gallopin’ to th’ door, and we hears him jist hit twice on his way down.

“Me and Peters sits there fer uh spell lookin’ foolish-like at each other and not knowin’ what to say.

“Finally I opines aloud that I believe Magpie’s been eatin’ loco salad and I’d better close-herd him before he bites somebody. Uh course Peters politely offers his valuable services, but I’m able to decline with thanks.

“Knowin’ Magpie’s failin’ in times uh stress, I ambles straight fer th’ nearest hooch emporium. I proves my deductions. There he is, draped over th’ bar, lookin’ sad-like into uh glass uh *woblum*—that bein’ th’ Chippeway appellation fer whisky.

“‘Magpie,’ sez I, puttin’ uh friendly hand on his droopin’ shoulder and motionin’ to th’ barkeep that mine’s th’ same, ‘why this cross between uh foot race and uh Piegan war dance?’

“He looks me over like uh man who is seein’ his last white chip go into th’ rack. He lifts up his right hand over his head like th’ peace signs yuh see in movin’ pictures and says: ‘Never again, Ike! Never again!’

"I'm agreeable. I don't know what he means, but I'm pleased. Any time Magpie says 'Never again,' I looks at th' future with more animation.

" 'Ike,' sez he, mournful-like, 'I'm sorry. It ain't fair to you. I reckon I'm one uh them persons who are born with uh lot uh brains and no sense. Some way I seems to ball up everything. But, Ike, I asks yuh, how did I know? I can't see that far, and it seemed like—'

" 'Magpie,' I replies, 'let's have uh little more uh th' same and then I'll accept any explanation yuh delivers. Remember I'm uh heap in th' dark yet.'

" 'Ike, yo're uh trustin' soul. Yuh shore are salt uh th' earth. I shore spilled th' beans, Ike, but I proved my point. Yes, sir, I reckon I proved it entirely. I knowed that uh little psychology with uh dash uh copper would make Tellurium—dang his little old petrified, moss-backed, narrow, contracted soul—'

" 'Pardner uh mine,' I interrupts, 'drink yore liquor and ferget them little ol' books fer oncet. Fer old Tellurium's sake I'm glad he's struck it rich. We'll amble up there tomorrow, and if she's as rich as Peters says she is, we'll—'

" 'Yah!' snorts Magpie. 'Don't talk Peters to me, Ike! I'm uh man of peaceful pursuits, but if I ever lays eyes on that little dancin' derby hat uh his I'm goin' to shoot.'

" 'Peters is workin' fer our interests, Magpie, and—'

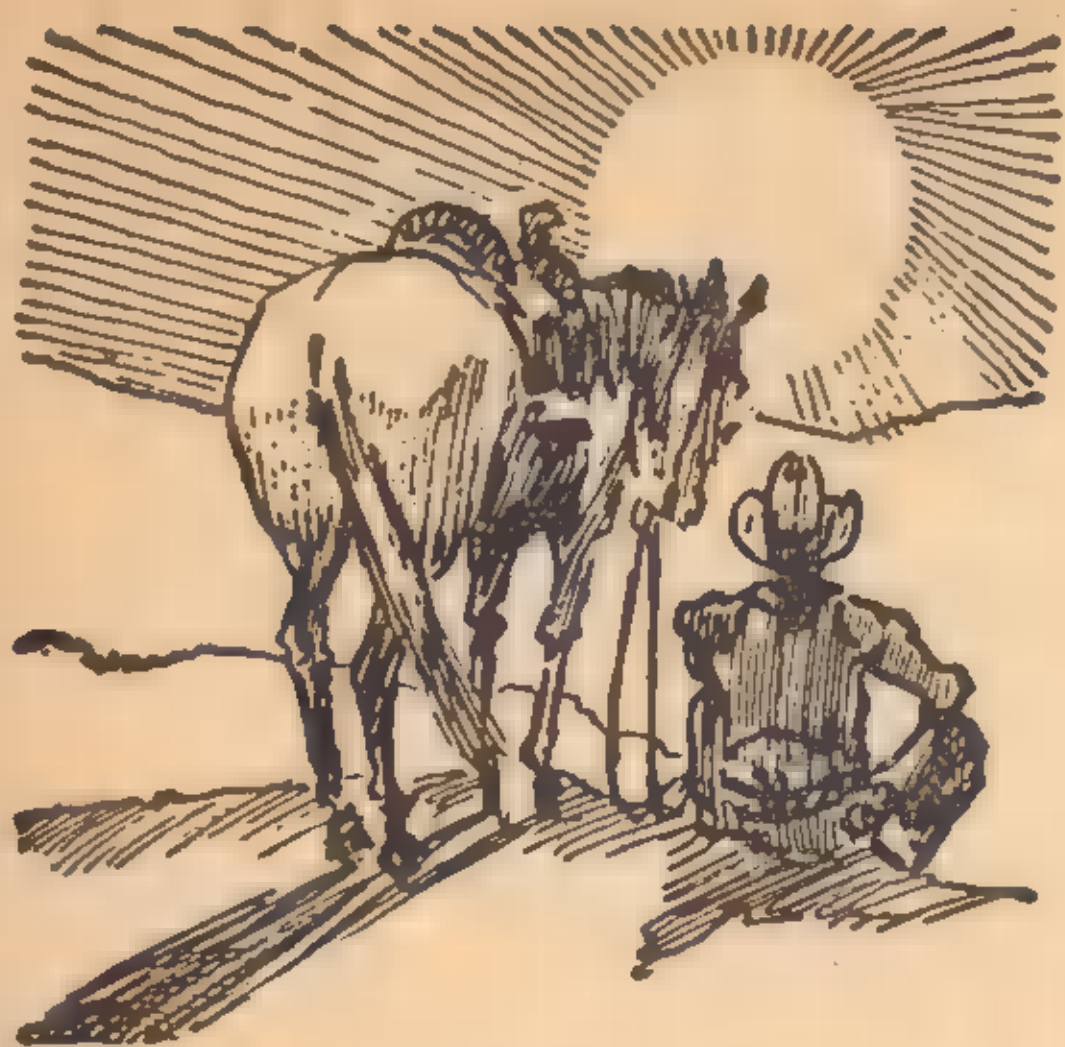
" 'Listen, Ike.' Magpie takes me by th' arm and leads me out of th' saloon. 'Uh grog-shop, Ike, ain't no place to discourse on scientific themes.'

"He leads me around the corner of th' building.

"Remember our bet on Tellurium's driftin' average, Ike?"

"I replies that I've uh hazy recollection of it.

" 'Well, Ike, winnin' that hundred from you, coupled with th' assistance of one Peters, has lost us th' Daylight mine,' he announces slow and distinct. 'Psychology hell! Remember that old copper bolt that was in our shack, Ike? Well, I—I took that bolt and ground her up, and salted his danged mine!' "



by
**O W E N
W I S T E R**

*An unforgettable tale
of the Old West*

THE RIGHT HONORABLE THE STRAWBERRIES

AS I LOOK back at his adventure among us, I can count on the fingers of one hand the occasions when his path crossed mine; between whiles, long stretches of it go out of sight—into what windings of darkness not one of the old lot at Drybone has ever known to a certainty. Some of those cow-punchers were with me that first morning when he appeared out of the void. I was new to the country, still a butt for their freaks, still credulous and amazed and curious; and that morning they were showing me the graveyard. Thirty years of frontier history could be read there at a glance, and no green leaf or flower or blade of grass grew in the place.

“May my tomb be near something cheerful!” I exclaimed.

“They don’t mind,” said Chalkeye.

“Their mothers would,” said I.

“Not the kind of mothers most of ’em probably had.” I walked off among the hollows and mounds of sand

over the sage-brush shorn by the wind. On that lone hill were headboards upright, and rotted headboards fallen on their faces. Drybone, the living town, itself already half skeleton, lay off a little way, down on the river bank. The bright sun was heating the undulated miles, which melted in more undulations to the verge of sight, and the slow warm air was strong with the spice of the sage-brush. The river below flowed soundlessly through the silence of the land.

They rode with me as I walked and paused to copy here and there some epitaph of a soldier when Drybone had been Fort Drybone, or of a civilian of the later day when the fort had been abandoned. Killed, most of them; few women there; one quite recent, buried at the end of a dance, where she had swallowed laudanum—so they were telling me, when they stopped to look off, down the river.

Somebody on a horse.

"Give me your glasses," said Chalkeye.

Everybody took a turn through them, while the object approached.

Chalkeye passed my glasses back to me, remarking, "He'll make you look like an old-timer."

I took my turn, and knew what he was at once.

"He's English," I told them.

He now noticed us, and began to trot.

"Hold him on, somebody!" cried Chalkeye.

"No need," said I. "That's not the first horse he has ridden."

"He's bouncing like you done at first," said Post Hole Jack.

They mentioned derisively his boots, his coat, his breeches, his hat. A shotgun gleamed across his saddle, from which some sage-chickens dangled. He had now turned off the stage road and was coming up the hill. He looked as tired as his horse. He was shaven clean and began to smile as we watched him nearing in silence.

"Made in Eton and Oxford—recently," I decided.

I saw that the sun had burned him unsparingly, that

his eyes were blue and merry, his hair a sunny yellow; his smile was confiding and direct, and boyhood shone in his face—but boyhood that already knew its way about in life.

"I beg pardon," he inquired in the light intonations of Mayfair. "I was looking for a place called Drybone. I was rather expecting to put up there. A place called Drybone."

"You've found it," said Chalkeye.

He turned to the cow-puncher with lifted brows. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said you'd found it," responded Chalkeye. "Drybone's right here."

"Oh, really? Oh, thanks!" He glanced at the graves inquiringly, and hesitated. "Oh. Really." He leaned to read the headboard I had been copying. "'Sacred to the memory of'—but there's more of the place than this, I hope?"

"A little more," said Chalkeye.

"Because they told me I could put up there"—again he glanced at the graves—"and one isn't quite ready."

"Ready?" repeated Chalkeye.

"To meet one's Maker and all that."

At these words, all in the light intonation of Mayfair, a unified, fascinated silence settled on the cow-punchers, and out of this spoke one hoarse whisper:

"What'd he say?"

"Because," the Englishman resumed with his confiding smile, "they do tell one things here. And the things are frightfully absorbing, but they're not always wholly accurate. So one can absolutely put up here without recourse to Abraham's bosom?"

"There's a hotel," I said. "I'm at it. Not ten minutes off."

At my voice he turned quickly. "Only ten minutes? How very jolly! I say, when did you arrive?"

The audience grinned; in spite of my sombrero and spurs and chaps, it was plain to him that I had arrived lately.

"This summer," I admitted with annoyance.

"But you're not English?"

"I'm from Philadelphia."

"I saw the place. Liberty Bell. I say, I could do with a bath. Five mornings now—by Jove, it's six!—with tin basins that were no better than they should be. And every jolly old towel had been trailed in ignominy. And I'm starving for a dreamless sleep. What do you do about the bugs? Well, thanks so very much."

He took the road, but not alone; escorting him trotted a hypnotized company, hanging speechless on his words.

"These," he said to me, touching the sage-chickens. "They vaguely suggest grouse. Edible? Hallo, there go some more running along!"

He was down, the reins flung over his horse's head, his gun ready.

Two birds rose and fell right and left, and he raced gleefully to pick them up. The cow-punchers looked at each other and again fixed their eyes on him.

"I say!" he cried, swinging into the saddle, "what lots of game! Do you produce dogs? I must manage to have a dog. Are these birds edible?"

"Those young ones," said Chalkeye. "That old one would taste strong. Better draw them now."

"Draw? Now what's that?"

"I'll show you."

"Now is this going to be one of the things they tell you?"

Chalkeye laughed joyously. "Lying is sweeter than sin to me," he declared, "but Tuesdays I swear off." He slit the birds open and cleaned them.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the Englishman. "You do a neat job."

"You'll do it next time," said Chalkeye, visibly flattered. "Your stirrups are too short, but you take your saddle-horn correct. Who learned you about dropping the reins?"

"That? Oh, the consequences of not. They had warned me, but I didn't think. And so there one was."

"Where was one?"

At this note of satire, the youth's eye gave a responsive flicker. "Well, in point of fact, not anywhere at all. There's such a lot of your extraordinary country that's not anywhere at all. And so I walked, and walked, and the horse led one on and on, just out of reach, and the sun was setting, and I felt like such a silly ass. Finally some admirable people appeared above the horizon, and one was tremendously obliged to them. Of course one hasn't mastered your language yet." And the eye flickered again.

"Can you rope?" asked Chalkeye.

"Not yet. Ah, that's quite a game, isn't it!"

"I'll learn you."

"Will you really? Oh, thanks. You'll find I'm a dismal duffer at it. There's been so little chance. Only last week I was in the Pullman. That's a ghastly vehicle. A mere curtain between the world and one's true self. No country but a singularly chaste one—I'm told yours is exorbitantly chaste—would tolerate adjacent dishabillé like that among the sexes. They told me Drybone would be a likely spot for seein' a bit of everything. I mean to say, of everything characteristic. I intend to believe faithfully all the things they tell me. It encourages them to tell more—and that is so very apt to be characteristic. Look how the sun has cooked my absurd countenance! I must absolutely procure a hat at once—a sensible hat like yours, I mean. Does Drybone contain hats?"

Chatting along as it came into his head, he was unaware of the town till he was in it, noticed it suddenly, and stopped.

"I say!" And he stared eagerly.

"Is it characteristic enough for you?" I inquired.

He eyed the mangy parade-ground; he took in the silent barracks, the desertion, the desolation, the naked flag pole, the broken windows. New life had adopted many of the old shells. Outlaws of both sexes were snugly housed here to welcome customers. He listened while Chalkeye pointed out the principal objects of in-

terest—the store, the hotel, the post and stage-office, the several dens of the assorted industries. He listened, and his blue eyes shone like a child's at a fairy-tale.

"Simply rippin'," he murmured.

From the undulated miles that engirt us, a warm slow wind brought the fragrance of the sage-brush, wild and clean among the shells of Drybone.

He sniffed it. "Good smell, that! Bucks one up." For a moment more he contemplated the town, stark in the sunlight, and dumb in its noontide torpor. The twinkle waked again in his eye. "From your engaging statistics," he said to Chalkeye, "I gather that among the articles of household furniture here, one mustn't count on meeting the cradle in any abundance?"

The eye of the cow-puncher sparkled an instant in response; then he replied dispassionately: "They claim there used to be a few. But the population always kept even, because whenever a child was born, some man left town."

The Englishman stared in perplexity.

"Now what's that?" And he thought hard over it. "Oh!" he cried, "I take you. Yes. A sweeping denunciation of the local morals!"

On our way across to the hotel, he was sunk in meditation, but twice muttered to himself, "Simply imperishable." He dismounted absent-mindedly, absent-mindedly wrote his name in the greasy and inky hotel book, and absent-mindedly followed up the stairs the gambler who kept the establishment. From his room door he called down, "Remember, you're going to teach me how to rope."

"You bet I will!" Chalkeye called up to him. With that was sown the seed of their fateful relation.

The punchers' heads were bending over the hotel book, studying his name.

"Give me a whole day," said one, "and I couldn't learn it by heart."

"It's good for a job at the Hat Six," said the Doughgy.

"Why the Hat Six?" I inquired.

"Not a man there goes by his real name this summer."

Chalkeye ran his finger slowly beneath the new arrival's writing.

"Measure that," he ordered.

"Measure it?"

"Did you figure," demanded Chalkeye witheringly, "that any human—don't care if he is an English lord—would invent half a foot of name for daily use? It was his folks. They done that to him at baptism when he was too young to state his objections."

But the Doughgy stuck to his doubts. "If he's a lord, why does he quit his baronial castle?"

"Maybe its roof's leakin'," said Post Hole Jack.

"Maybe he's lost it at cards," suggested Hard Winter Hance. "Lords do that."

"And maybe he's just having a look at life like the rest of us," said Chalkeye contemptuously. "What are his reasons to me?"

"He's got 'em all right," the Doughgy insisted. "You bet. Well, the Hat Six will go without letters till next mail day—I can't wait for that stage any longer." His spurs scraped jingling across the porch, he swung on his horse and was gone. They followed.

The sound of their galloping died away, their dust paled and vanished in the distance, and I loitered in the noon sun and the torpor, waiting dinner and aware of the pervading sage-brush. Who was right? I had never seen Chalkeye take to a stranger so quickly. The Doughgy could hardly know that the startling freedom of speech in Englishmen—freedom where the American is silent—freedom as to their incomes, their families, their gaieties—can go with a fathomless reticence, deep beyond our unversed technique. The American with something behind his scenes generally lets it show through his cracks; a consummate product like this blossom of aristocracy can seem wide open yet be tight shut.

Still, he was young, he must be very young; surely too young to have something behind the scenes already! But

a beautiful, consummate product, a thousand years in the making.

"Say."

The voice came from the hotel porch; it was the landlord-gambler.

"Dinner?" I responded.

"Madden's looking after that, I guess."

His hotel was little to him, save to house and detain the traveler who passed—and stopped to play cards. Here often sat the big cattlemen until their thousands were gone, while lesser citizens dropped their hundreds, and the cow-puncher what his pocket still held after he had paid his visits to the women.

"Say," the landlord repeated. "That friend of yours ain't the love's young dream he looks."

Could the Doughgy be right? "Has he dealt you a hand already?" I laughed.

"No," said the landlord reflectively. "No, he didn't deal me any hand. At the rate he was goin' to bed, I guess he's asleep by now." Further meditation led to further remarks. "He mentioned he was expectin' his baggage by the stage. I said in that case I'd like a cash deposit. 'How much?' he said. 'Twenty-five dollars,' I said. 'Right-oh!' was the words he used, and out comes his money. He's got plenty. He knowed it was a week's board and he asked for a receipt. Well, he got it off me, I was that amazed. There's no correspondence at all between his kiss-me-good-night-mother face and his adult actions.

"Hot water's what he wanted next, and clean sheets. He's between them sheets now. First time I ever done such a thing. Must have been his language. Kind of stunned me. 'Double or quits,' says he when I come back with the hot water and found him half naked already. You'd ought to see his fancy underwear. 'Ain't you eatin' dinner?' I said, and he says, 'I'll eat it the day after tomorrow. Don't let them break my dreamless sleep! Who's your friend?'"

"I've not made his acquaintance yet."

"H'm. D'you figure he's wanted where he's known?"

"More likely he's *not* wanted where he's known."

"H'm. D'you figure it's some other feller's wife?"

"They'd draw the line at her, not at him."

"Don't they draw the line for lords anywheres?"

"Oh, yes!"

While the landlord was hearing my account of where they did draw the line, a shrill Mongolian voice cried from somewhere indoors: "Dinnes leddy!"

It was Madden, sole servant of the hotel, cook, waiter, room sweeper, bed maker, who after the day's work lost his wages regularly and incurably at every game he tried in the den.

Still the landlord stood on his porch thinking. "Say. That kid's folks raised him wrong. If they'd exposed him to the weather some, he might have been a credit to them."

"You've not mentioned what came of double or quits," I remarked.

"Ain't I? Oh, well—I don't grudge it to him. He's got his twenty-five back, and twenty-five of mine, and my receipt for a week's board."

"God bless my soul!"

"Oh, it won't be let stay with him long. When we started in to match, I said I'd take a look at his coin. He looked at me. 'Certainly,' he says, with six inches of ice on his voice; and his face got redder than his sun-burn. Nothin' was wrong with the coin. 'And now,' he says, takin' another look at me, 'I'll not ask to see yours.' Funny how he made those harmless words sound, but say, how can you hit a person that's only got his underwear on? He's an adult, all right. Oh, it'll be won back off him. I guess he'll not require to be called. The cock-roaches will look him up this evenin'."

I wondered a little at his way of putting it—"It'll be won." Why not say right out, "I'll win it"? If you're a professional gambler, why be sensitive?

"Dinnes leddy!" again shrieked the odd Mongolian voice.

"All right, Madden," called the landlord. "But if your friend stays among us, this lonesome country will not miss the circus to speak of."

Madden on certain nights scattered in his kitchen a powder which drove up into the bedroom above it swarms of those rushing insects that haunt sinks. When this occurred, nobody could remain long in a dreamless sleep. We should have our first circus in a few hours. To think of this cheered me throughout dinner in spite of my sullen neighbor, whose very silence was disagreeable. He was a gambler from Powder River, and he too used to win the poor Chinaman's wages. Madden's hand shook as he served him.

Yes, it was my turn to see, instead of to be, the circus. Entertainment for this lonesome country would now be furnished by another—unless he should modify himself, which Englishmen seldom do; they merely wonder why you don't. Why was he here, remote from the feudal centuries which had produced him, so flawless, with his confiding smile, his wary wits, his merry blue eye, his poise, his flaxen hair, his leap at the sight of a bird to shoot, that flash of skill with a gun which there and then had won the heart of Chalkeye in spite of any outlandish fashion in speech or dress? Flawless? Or was there a flaw at which they had drawn the line? I hoped that the Doughgy was wrong—and I looked forward to the circus.

After supper, when the night's gambling had begun, my suspense increased. I played poker for a while, as usual a loser, and the man from Powder River did not grow more agreeable over the cards. I had a sense of something in the wind outside my understanding. I left the game and sat in the office by the big table, idly reading the stale newspapers strewn upon it, waiting for the cockroaches.

At length a very marked disturbance was set up above, and to my delight I heard a voice say clearly: "Why, damn it, look at that! Oh, I say, just look at that!"

The Englishman came down-stairs. He was barefoot, clad scantily in a garment or two, with the bedquilt

clutched round him. He came without haste, candid, cheerful, self-possessed beneath his rumpled tangle of yellow hair.

"Oh, there you are! No ladies present, I hope? One couldn't stop up there, you know. Myriads of active creatures streaking and twinkling. A creature got in my ear and banished sleep, and I felt others hastening over me; so I lighted a lamp, and saw them rushing. Walls—pillow—myriads—they ran out of my trousers and into my boots. One positively can't stop up there."

"I couldn't," I told him; at which his blue eyes fixed me with sudden attention. "I didn't," I pursued. "I slept on this table."

"Oh. Really. Oh. Yes. One of those characteristic things! Well, it's a peerless success. But I hope that whatever others are in store will be more subtle. Where's the landlord? Would he mind if I slept on the table?" He went to the open door of the saloon. "Landlord, it's a peerless success. Would you mind if I sleep on the table?"

"Sleep where it suits you, kid. But now you're awake, what's the matter with a little poker?"

"Oh, thanks so very much, no, I'm too much of a kid, if you don't mind. I'll just coil up on the table."

The special vibrations in his utterance of "kid" went home to the ears of the gamblers, a light sound of laughter at the landlord's expense rose and died.

In his quilt, the barefoot boy stood motionless, watching the dingy, dangerous group at their game. His hair and his slim, erect form were touched by the light of a lamp near him; a high lamp in the saloon shone down upon the players and their cards. Other lamps struck gleams from the thick glasses along the bar, gleams from the bottles stacked above it, and the pictures of pink women and prizefighters flanking the bottles made patches of light on the wall. Big hats hung on nails, and their owners sat at various tables in boots and spurs and flannel shirts and leather chaps, their heads unbrushed, their necks dark and seamed, their hands knotted, scarred, their pistols visible.

He hung so long upon the scene that I thought he might be going to change his mind and join them in the name of the characteristic, but in time he turned away. Was it some trick of light and shadow? His face seemed to look as it might when he should be fifty; not because of any wrinkles, but from whatever spiritual demolition it is that age sometimes wreaks on the human countenance. It must have been a trick of the lamp; as he came forward, he was merely the serene boy that had stalked down from the cockroaches fifteen minutes ago; and with his words, his confiding smile shone out again.

"I say! Simply rippin'! John Sargent ought to paint your friends. It would make a pair with his Spanish den of melody and sudden death one saw in Paris. But that Chinaman should keep out of it. What chance has he got in there?"

John Sargent was not yet even a name to me, and I asked no questions as the boy went on.

"Well, now for your landlord's ample hospitality on this jolly old table. I could do with a little more bedding."

He glanced alertly about the office; dragged a saddle from a corner, threw over it the saddle-blanket, stiff and odorous with sweat, and so contrived himself a pillow; he mashed and shaped the stale newspapers into a wad between his bones and the table, got up on it, and was curling himself with his back to the light when a crash in the next room, and voices of violence, and shots, brought him up sitting.

"Get down!" I said to him; and I ran out of range and crouched.

He sat on his table, gazing with an interested expression at the saloon.

"Get down! You'll be killed!" I shouted from my shelter.

He did not turn his head.

The crashes and the scuffling of boots had ceased, and only the shots rang. The duel came through the door into the office: first, the sullen man who had been at din-

ner, backing, aiming, firing, and so step by step to the front door. Standing a moment there, he shot, his arm swung wild and limp, he slanted backward, grabbing at the jamb, lurched and fell outward, and lay so, his boots with his spurs and long heels sticking stiffly into the room.

Gripping a peg by the door of the saloon, the landlord leaned for support, fired twice more, coughed horribly and pitched forward flat on his face as his pistol bumped a few feet across the floor. Smoke floated thick in the room. Its smell hit my throat like a file, and through it I saw the boy, seated on his table still. Faces from various sides began cautiously to peep and peer. The boy moved, got down slowly, and slowly walked to the saloon door, and slowly stooped down.

"He's dead," I heard him say, almost under his breath; and I found that I was still crouching in my corner. I rose, and he noticed me. "So they meant it," he said quietly.

The peeping faces had now made sure that this affair was over, and the emptied premises were crowded for a while with neighbors who had left whatever they were doing to gather details of the incident. So it was those two! Then what was behind it? A split between partners? Or had it come up over the landlord's woman? Well, others were ready to fill the vacant situation. Maybe she'd take Jack Saunders now. Well, neither party would be missed.

And amid such dispassionate comment, both parties were lifted and carried somewhere, while Madden appeared with a bucket, and after splashing water on the floor, went on his knees to scrub it with true Chinese diligence. Before he was done, all neighbors had gone back to their own business, and there were the boy and I alone in the office. Neither of us had spoken while the crowd was talking, and none had spoken to us, or noticed us particularly.

"Do they always take this sort of thing as a matter of course?" he now inquired.

"I suppose so. It's my first experience."

"I say. When you told me to hook it, you know, I believed everybody was ragging for my special edification."

I smiled, and he smiled a little, too.

"I say. What would be your idea as to ■ good big drink?"

"So be it. On me."

"No, no. One isn't destitute. Come up-stairs."

There I shared his whisky, and he shared my room, safe from cockroaches. Destitute! An odd word.

Next day the two parties went to inhabit the graveyard, and their places in Drybone were filled by the living. Sundry horsemen ambled casually into town through this forenoon on various pretexts. Every one of them was to be seen at some time or other stooping over the hotel register, and I wondered if the boy noticed that each, before ambling out, somehow had a word or two with him.

Tom King, foreman of the V R outfit, returned to Deer Creek, disappointed not to have identified the Englishman he had once seen at O'Neil City, Texas, dealing faro; through that day and the next, others who had met here and there similar nomads of disgrace, ambled in: the lonesome country entertained itself with no circus but with many guesses behind his back. The word he dropped out of silence the second afternoon as he smoked his pipe perhaps gave a clue to his thoughts.

"Can they always find so much spare time?"

His tone may have been a trifle lighter than common, perhaps something like a shadow was present in his eyes; I couldn't be sure, as he smoked on for a while. Destitute?

"Will Chalkeye be coming along again?" he presently asked.

"Probably for the mail, and certainly as soon as he has money to spend."

"I like Chalkeye."

He did not like the hotel, or its new proprietor-gambler, Jack Saunders. This personage had exacted and

promptly received a cash deposit, when the boy took steps to find a habitation of his own. He chose what remained of the old adjutant's office, out of which one good room could still be made.

"Aiming to take out naturalization papers?" Saunders inquired.

"Now there's an ideal!" retorted the boy pleasantly. "To become your fellow subject one almost would."

"Citizens live here."

"Quite! I beg their eighty million pardons."

With narrowed eyes, Saunders stood for a moment, then went about his business, and the boy made some purchases for housekeeping.

"How do you swallow the filth they give you for coffee?" he asked me. "One could learn to cook as well as to rope. If ever my things do come, you'll see my room won't be half bad."

They came the following week, and his first mail came, many letters, forwarded to Cheyenne first and thence here, with a black-edged one among them. Passengers were in the office, bound north, and punchers had gathered for their mail. These watched him tear open the black-edged letter first, and after a glance, forget his surroundings. He seemed to read it twice, and stood then, holding it absently, and spoke, not to us, but to space.

"Well, I shall miss old John."

In the silence, some boot scraped on the floor. Perhaps they were hoping for a circus. He read the bad news again.

"Only a week. And then—gone."

Among the forgotten audience, the fact of Chalkeye penetrated his trance.

"John was such a jolly old sot," he confided to Chalkeye, as if the two were alone.

"There's some here," said the puncher awkwardly, "that could fill his place that way for you."

The boy did not seem to hear him.

"Of course, one wasn't going to see John again very

soon, but—well, of course that's one life less between me and the strawberry leaves," he finished in a tone abruptly matter-of-fact.

Stupefaction deepened the noiselessness.

"Us Americans," said Jack Saunders, intentionally ungrammatical, "ain't never studied your foreign fruits. Was John climbin' the tree for them strawberries when he fell?"

A dark flush instantly spread over Chalkeye's face, while the boy looked somewhat long, but very amiably, at Saunders before he answered.

"Oh," he said in his lightest tone, and as if from a distance, "John was my brother, you see."

If this was a circus, it was not he that furnished it. The stage was ready, its passengers left for the north, most of the cow-punchers rode away, and anyone who had come in now to join the few of us that remained, could not have read in the boy's recovered aspect anything of the shock which had been for a brief space too much for him.

Chalkeye failed to suppress his customary thirst for information.

"About the strawberry leaves. Would you object to telling some more? Don't, if you do."

"Very glad to. One forgets. If you Americans only spoke a language entirely your own, it wouldn't be so baffling. You're so absurdly like us at odd moments, and so inconceivably not at others—you've not, for instance, inherited certain ancient—suppose we say habits? Such as the eldest son. Call it a bad habit if you like, but there it is!—and you were a bit slow in getting rid of your own bad habit of slavery, weren't you? Now I'm rather fond of our ancient habits, and yet I've always been a younger son."

"But you're not now that—that—he's gone?"

"John? Oh, yes, I am." Here he turned to me and forgot the cow-punchers, speaking to me as if we were alone. "John was next above me, and such a dear fellow. We hunted pleasure in couples through the London

night. Happy times! The Criterion after the theaters, and all that, you know. I couldn't carry my wine like John, but I shouldn't even in my most careless moments ever have brought a poll to our house in Portman Square. I never saw the pater so waxy. That simply isn't done, you know. Granville's next above John. Bowls, and not bad at the wicket. Chandos is next above Granville. He got a blue. He's secretary to Lord Lyons, at our embassy in Paris. Wymford's rather political—makes speeches and all that. Of course, Wymford isn't his own father. What's the matter?" he asked, for Chalkeye had raised a pleading hand.

"We're beginners," said the puncher. "You'll have to make the strawberries easier."

"Oh. Wymford is the eldest son's title in our family. He'll drop it when he succeeds. One's parents," he continued to me, again leaving the rest out, "were absurdly prolific. If he had met us, Wordsworth would never have stopped his poem at seven, because I'm the eleventh and last, and he could have so readily changed the meter. Wymford—his name is Charles—was the first-born. His title came into the family—but I'll skip that—he'll have the strawberry leaves when he succeeds the pater. If he were to die, my brother Ronald, the next son, would have them. I don't want to bore you," he said to the others.

"You don't. Go on, Prince."

"Not even baronet! Well. How to simplify? How to sketch? Well, it's like this."

They attended closely to his brief account of titles, coronets, emblems, the general scheme of the British peerage.

"I suppose it all sounds awfully odd to you. But it's rather natural to us."

"Is it nine," asked Post Hole Jack, "nine that's ahead of you still? Those strawberries will be ripe."

"Nine? Nine lives? But, my dear sir, one has sisters."

"Don't the girls get any?"

"Dear me, no! Fancy women in the Lords!"

"Then," pursued Post Hole Jack, "you're nothing at all?"

"Nothing but just that." And he displayed to us in turn his name on his letters. As the Doughgy looked at it, the boy looked at him with his confiding smile and said, "I fancy you may have noticed it already in the hotel register."

Triumph gleamed in the glance that Chalkeye gave the embarrassed Doughgy, who slowly mumbled the name aloud.

The boy laughed out again.

"The family would never suspect you meant me if you said it like that," and he pronounced it correctly. "Of course we don't spell it so."

"What's the point?" asked Jack Saunders; and at his tone Chalkeye looked sharply at him.

"Oh," replied the boy with his voice light and distant, "no point. It's merely the right way."

"In America," said Saunders, "we tell how to say ■ word by its spelling."

"But do you so invariably? One's train on a Thursday morning was in a place they called O-h-i-o, and by Friday afternoon they were calling it I-o-wah. Now what have I said?" he asked me.

The general explosion which burst out immediately upon his words drowned the explanation I attempted.

"Well," he said, looking on at our mirth, "it's very pleasant to excite all this cheer. At home one never aroused so much."

The wild joy of living now seized the cow-punchers suddenly. They swung on their horses and galloped through Drybone with shouts and pistol-shots. At this disturbance, a few faces looked out to see if anything unusual was the matter, found nothing, and disappeared. Saunders walked back to his hotel, and it seemed as if a cloud had gone with him.

"An extraordinary country," said the boy to me as we watched the rushing medley of horsemen. "I like them. I like them very much. Will they come back today?"

They came back in a few minutes, soothed and quiet, and meanwhile I had explained Ohio to him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "have one on Ohio. Is that good American?"

We were soon standing along the nearest bar.

"How!" said Post Hole Jack, and "How!" said they all.

"Here's to the Right Honorable Alphabet Strawberries."

"The fall roundup is pretty near due," said Chalkeye, "and I'll be too busy to call him all that every time I want to speak to him. Here's to Strawberries."

"Now you can get a job at the Hat Six," said the Doughgy.

Well, that is the first circus he provided for the lonesome country, and that is how he got his name. Through the weeks following, it fastened upon him, and through the succeeding years he went by no other. He took no job at the Hat Six, or anywhere; at not infrequent intervals, money came to him, always spent soon, often unwisely, seldom on others; like his kind he was close with his cash, and he did not modify this or any other of his native habits. He borrowed readily, paid back casually, yet his pleasant and fearless readiness covered his shortcomings.

By his extravagance he kept himself habitually behind, which did not weigh upon him heavily.

Civilized comforts and objects gradually filled his room, where hung hunting-crops, sporting trophies, with the photographs of his past; handsome folk, all with the look of his race, urbane and arrogant, men young and old, and two or three beautiful women, with their names written across the pictures in firm round English hands. When need of money pressed him hard, he would raffle a pipe, or a scarf, or one of the civilized objects admired by Drybone and its vicinity. The lonesome country accepted him, liked him; and one there had become his sponsor and wished to be his mentor.

"Are you acquainted with many of those English aristocrats?" Chalkeye asked one day.

"With very few."



We were gathering stock through the high draws of Casper Mountain, not long before I was to go home. The leaves of the quaking aspens glorified the slopes and splashed the ridges with gold. Among them down below, the boy came for a moment into sight, looking for a white-tailed deer.

"They claim families like his were families before America was discovered," pursued Chalkeye.

"Quite a number were."

"So those dukes and lords have been seeing life for hundreds of years."

"They certainly have."

Chalkeye communed with his thoughts for a while. "He never touches a card," he presently said.

"What's your point?"

"Nothing much. Only with his other goings on, you'd think he'd enjoy that too."

"Too?"

The puncher laughed a little. "He told me lately that he was not my business."

"Said it?—just like that?"

"Said it without words. I don't want him to get into trouble with Jack Saunders."

Then I saw it in a flash; I had been quite blind to it.

"Yes," said Chalkeye, "it's her that got widowed by that last shooting at the hotel. She prefers to console herself with Strawberries. Well, in her place so would I. Jack is fifty, and washes Saturday nights, which for him is insufficient.—D'you figure his folks back in England are really paying him to keep away?"

"Looks like it."

"Poor kid!" Chalkeye fell silent, ruminating. "A better bluff I've never seen." A small bunch of cattle occupied us before he resumed.

"But now and then—well, now and then he forgets to keep it up, and a man can see he has been through something."

The puncher ruminated again. "I made a little talk to Jack. I guess there's talks he has liked better, but I guess maybe he'll bear it in mind."

How deeply the gambler bore it in mind was not made clear that day, or for many days.

A shot far down below startled us unreasonably.

"Hark!" said Chalkeye.

We reined in and listened; no further sound broke upon the great stillness of the mountains.

"He has got his deer!" I declared confidently.

"He has got his deer!" repeated Chalkeye cheerfully; and we rode down to see, driving the cattle before us through the silence which our unspoken thoughts rendered needlessly ominous.

Strawberries had got his white-tailed deer with one bullet, well-placed just behind the shoulder; we had been right; it was merely this; yet that shot has left a mark in my memory, as many a trivial event will do when it is embedded among somber recollections.

As we came near with our cattle, Strawberries was kneeling to skin and dress his game, and he glanced up at Chalkeye. In his eye I caught it then, caught what I should have missed but for that recent word of the cow-puncher's, the sort of look which an enterprising child will turn upon a restraining nurse. "He told me lately that he was none of my business." Chalkeye had expressed it perfectly.

On the trail to camp, a rain came thick and sudden upon us out of a canyon, and this furnished our cattle an excellent pretext to break and scatter. Strawberries was after them instantly.

"Let him do it by himself!" Chalkeye commanded me. "See him get his slicker on! Ain't he learning quick? I'll make a dandy puncher of him!" He watched his apt and active pupil critically. "He'd ought to have gone round them willows the other side. Well, what'd you know

about that! Did you notice the way he headed that Goose Egg heifer off at the creek?"

Certainly it was all neatly and swiftly done; a better job than any of my attempts, in spite of my three months' start; and the remark of the late landlord's came to me as he stood on his porch that first morning and reflected on the boy's parents. "If they'd exposed him to the weather some," said he, "he might have been a credit to them."

That had been merely one instance of how this flaxen-haired aristocrat could disarm the cattle country's rooted distrust of his kind without lifting a finger, without even noticing it; and without the visible lift of a finger he had beckoned to him the late landlord's woman. So much better to have done without her, to have let Jack Saunders have her.

He was now in front of us, driving the collected cattle along the wet trail. The cloud of storm and thunder had gone prowling along the farther hills, the sage-brush gave forth its sharpened pungency to the sky, and the boy, as he passed an Indian paint-brush flaming by the trail, swung down and snapped its blossom off in his hand.

"He might be one of us," said Chalkeye.

"Never," I said to myself. How should Chalkeye, or any of them, discern the line which Strawberries drew between himself and their equality? Or understand that the true aristocrat always is the best democrat, because he is at his ease with everybody, and makes them so with him?

"Only maybe," continued the puncher, to my surprise, "he can't forget his raising."

Perhaps Strawberries seemed more nearly to forget his raising one early morning soon after this than at any other time I can recall. It was at breakfast in the next camp to which we moved, while he was in the act of learning from the cook how to toss flapjacks. Watching the performance sat various cow-punchers in a circle, and Chalkeye as he passed by stopped and gave vent to a prolonged, joyous and vibrating shout.

Strawberries paused with his ladle in midair. "Now why exactly do you do that?" he inquired.

"Can't seem to help it," responded the cow-puncher. "It's just my feelings. When I look at that"—he swept his arm toward the splendid plains and the hills glowing in the sun—"well, I want to swallow it, and I want to jump on a horse and dive into it." He drew in a huge breath and became lyric. "It makes a man feel like he could live the whole of himself at wunst. I'd like to have ten fights, and ten girls, and ten drinks, and I'd come pretty near enjoying sudden death."

"So would I!" exclaimed the boy; and he sprang to his feet. "Let's all howl together! Now!" and he waved his ladle. "One, two, three!"

All of us had jumped up, and in unison we gave forth the full power of our lungs in that crystal air that was like creation's first light. Three hawks sailed out of some pines above, several cattle stampeded below in the sagebrush, the team tried to run away with the wagon, and two or three punchers who were throwing the herd off the bed-ground came galloping in.

And yet Strawberries, when bored or displeased, could withdraw his voice to a great distance. He withdrew it after we had reached Drybone, and with a chill that made the shrewdness of Chalkeye's doubt as to his being able to forget his raising very marked indeed. As we rode to the post office, all the dark causes of what was to happen in its due season were present and visible: lust of the flesh, a bully's vindictiveness, human frailty, and protecting friendship.

The widow was standing at ■ door, and she exchanged a glance of understanding with her preferred lover, who had been absent for many days; Saunders was coming along with a saddled horse at which I noticed Chalkeye was staring. Here were all the causes, needing only the right chance to get them in motion. It took its time to arrive, and on this particular occasion, the lonesome country was merely provided with another circus.

The horse was for sale. Strawberries had owned two horses for some time, but he had been looking for a third, with a view to training him to jump. He

thought that the neighborhood afforded opportunities for arranging a steeplechase course with but small effort. Steeplechasing would be a desirable addition to the country's pleasures. Here, in the opinion of Saunders, was just the animal for Strawberries, and a bargain.

"Then he can jump?" the boy inquired.

"He can jump, all right," drawled the gambler, which set a bystander laughing.

Neither Strawberries nor I had been long enough in the country to interpret this laughter. And yet—something was in the air, at least, so it seems in the strange afterglow of retrospect.

Strawberries looked the horse over with a practised eye. "I'll get on him."

"Don't get on him," said a peremptory voice.

At this, everybody stared. It was Chalkeye who had spoken out thus, unwarrantably. He got a very ugly look from Saunders, but from Strawberries he received the perfection of disdain.

"I beg your pardon. Did you speak?" That was when his voice came from extreme remoteness.

"I said not to get on that horse."

If Strawberries had been fully determined not to get on, naturally this would have been more than enough to make him change his mind. He dismounted from his own horse with careful deliberation and walked to the bony animal that Saunders held, a roan with a Roman nose and a watching eye. "Take your medicine, then," muttered Chalkeye gruffly.

Then I guessed what the matter was, and knew that this was the horse that went by the name of Calamity.

It was quite admirable to see how the boy sat the bucking beast after Saunders had let him go. I should have been flung off in a moment. The struggle began amid expectant silence, the ancient instinct with which Rome watched the gladiator; but when the boy's pluck and skill had held out longer than their expectation, voices broke out here and there calling instructions to him.

The horse went through his last of contortions. Arching his back like a cat, he jumped in the air, landed like lead and shook himself as a dog coming out of the water, reared gigantically, stood on his front legs and kicked his hind ones, sprang forward with a dozen jolting spasms, whirled aside, reared again—until the boy was shot off into the dust, from which he did not rise.

Chalkeye carried him to his room of luxury among the photographs and soft skins and rugs, and put him on his bed, and got his clothes off; while the widow stood by, useless, lamenting, in the way, crying out that if the boy died she would kill Jack Saunders, she would.

“That’ll be my job,” said Chalkeye quietly. “Get some water and shut your mouth.”

She carried out the first part of this direction; the rest was quite beyond her powers. She was a pretty girl, and still young, with an aspect which told plainly what sort of widow she was—quite the ordinary specimen of her kind. She meant no mischief, but she loved to burst on people with explosive news; and so on her errand for the water her tongue was free, and all Drybone learned of Chalkeye’s intention. Except that she sowed a few more seeds for the future harvest, I don’t think she did any harm. Saunders wished no trouble with Chalkeye; the cow-puncher had too many friends; and no steps had to be taken unless Strawberries died.

Strawberries did not die. After lying unconscious for two days, he opened his eyes and quietly remarked:

“Leon-i-das

On a one-eyed ass.”

This was a quotation. He did not go on with it; he shut his eyes and seemed to fall away from life again. I suppose that poem must have been the last thing in his mind before his concussion. Some hours later, Chalkeye came in from the roundup for news. At the opening of the door, Strawberries waked and surveyed us, and after a time asked languidly:

“Am I a one-eyed ass?”

Chalkeye looked at me in alarm. “Good God!” he

whispered. In the face in the bed appeared a flicker of the confiding smile.

"Am I in the hands of God? Is it as bad as that?"

"You'll get well," stated Chalkeye, instantly reassured. "And you be quick about it. When the roundup's over, the boys want you to go on an elk hunt with them."

So that circus ended happily, and the lonesome country liked Strawberries better than ever. And before the boys went on their elk hunt, he received an unusual honor.

It was remembered that he was interested in the characteristic. Now a stranger had come through the country some weeks ago, and after displaying very marked and exceptional ability by selling the same stolen horses to a succession of different purchasers, had thoughtfully sought another neighborhood. But here it seemed that his skill had fallen short. A conversation stopped abruptly upon my entrance to the cabin of luxury one afternoon. Some ranch owners whom I knew slightly sat there and looked at me and said the weather was fine.

If Strawberries was aware that they did not wish me to know what they had been saying to him, he chose to disregard it.

"Then you mean," said he, "that you're bringing me an invitation?"

"You're the only outsider that's in the party," said one visitor.

"There'd be no outsider," added another, "only he has went too far, and deserves no consideration."

"Of course you'll not speak of this," said a third, to me.

"But you say you haven't caught him yet," said Strawberries.

"We have him located."

"He might give you the slip, you know."

"I guess you can leave that to us."

"And am I to start at the post and be in at the finish?"

"That was our idea."

Strawberries shook his head in silence.

They rose.

"You understand," said one, "it's the rule of the game. He knows the rules, he took the chances. That man is too tough for this country. We've got it to do. You understand?"

"Oh, quite, quite! Don't apologize."

"We're not apologizing to anybody."

"I do!" exclaimed Strawberries quickly. "I shouldn't have said that. It was rotten. And thanks so very much. And in your place, possibly, you know, I—but it's not quite the same thing, is it? So you won't mind?"

If Strawberries ever adopted the custom of the country enough to take part in a lynching, it was not in Wyoming. What he may have done elsewhere lies beyond my knowledge in the many regions where his wanderings took him. That visit, when the ranchmen sat in his cabin and showed him this peculiar mark of their esteem, was my last sight of him at this stage of his career, the last, that is, of any consequence.

I was gone when the elk hunt came off, and no tidings of Strawberries reached me in the East for several months, when friends in Cheyenne wrote asking me what I knew about him. There it was again, the Doughgy's doubt on the first day, forgotten as we grew accustomed to Strawberries! Well, at Cheyenne and at the various ranches of my friends to whom he now paid long visits, it became forgotten in the same way.

The next thing was a newspaper clipping. "Popular Peer Pushes Polo," was its skilful caption. It was mailed me by a ranch friend on the Chugwater. The same friend gave me news of the popular peer when we met at Harvard on Commencement Day. At the Cheyenne Club, on the Chugwater, at Bordeaux, wherever Strawberries went, and he seemed to have gone everywhere in Wyoming, he first raised doubts and then won hearts; and the doubts were forgotten.

The college graduates who had ranches in the country encouraged his long visits, even though they knew he made them to save expense, and even though at the Cheyenne Club on the rare occasions when he ordered a drink,

it was seldom for anyone but himself; I have said that he modified nothing. Nobody minded this in an Englishman; they were glad to pay for his drinks, they owed him so much.

His energy didn't stop with the polo he organized—at that time a complete novelty; in the following years he carried out his plan for a steeplechase, and another newspaper cutting came to me in the East. "Swell Snugly Sits Saddle." He sat it in several places, for on my next visit to Drybone, three summers later, he was staying with the cavalry officers at Fort McKinney, and had started them steeplechasing on Clear Creek.

"But none of us can make him touch a card," said my friend of the Cheyenne Club on Commencement Day.

"He never does at Drybone," said I.

He never did anywhere. I saw him often during those years, but there's nothing to tell of our meetings; he had become an institution. Drybone remained his headquarters, but sometimes I found him at Cheyenne, where he would lie in bed at the club for two days at a time, remarking that if I would tell him something to get up for, he would do it. Then his energy would come uppermost, and it would be polo, or steeplechasing, or a journey to Montana for greyhounds to course antelope with (this was a failure), or an extended hunt for elk in the fall or for bear in the spring.

Yes, he was an institution; the sight of him had grown so familiar to the country that it was only now and then that the mystery of his unexplained coming was remembered. His money continued to arrive regularly, and a sporting paper he called the Pink Un; and almost every mail brought him letters that bore English stamps; and these he seemed always to answer within a day or two, giving a long morning to it among his photographs and souvenirs. If I came in at these times, he would look up from his writing, and I knew that he wished to be alone by the very civility of his "Oh, it's you! Come in." And as I went out, his apology followed—"If you don't mind."

That's one picture of him I retain: the latest Pink Un lying near him, his elbows spread flat out, his head near the blue blotting paper, his flaxen hair rumpled in the effort of composition; and on the walls around him, those faces of handsome, arrogant men and women, distant and impassive. What was in those letters? Questions about sisters, horses, dogs, home? Messages to old companions? Was he gazing through bars at sunlight while he bent over the blotting paper?

"D'you figure he's got a life sentence?" said the Doughgy to Chalkeye one day. "D'you figure they'll commute for good conduct? Or will they let him back on parole?"

"I ain't figuring at all," said Chalkeye. "It's his present I'm vouching for, not his past or his future. And I've given all men notice to that effect."

"Humph!" laughed the Doughgy. "You needn't get so hot about it." And he protracted his teasing. "I expect," said he in a tone of judicial thought, "lords and barons and high-ups like that don't condescend to take notice of what low-downs like you and me think of their morals?"

"Since when have you been practising morals?"

"Oh, I don't practise 'em or preach 'em, any more than you. But we haven't had his advantages."

A light broke on me, and I addressed the Doughgy. "Do you mean to say that Drybone blames Strawberries for doing just what it does itself?"

"I don't mean to say anything," laughed the Doughgy. "But would he do it at home?"

In that word lay the pith of the matter. The widow, whenever Strawberries went away, had always moved from the hotel into his cabin by way of taking care of it during his absence, and moved out upon his return, but when he had returned this spring, she had remained. Now, although Drybone hadn't a moral to its back, this was indifference to appearances in a visitor who would respect them in his own country—weren't the free-born citizens of Drybone the equals of any English subject?

"I see your point," I said gravely to the Doughgy,

"though I never met this particular assertion of democratic faith before. But after all, there's a proverb that when you're in Rome, you do as Rome does."

"It don't apply," retorted the Doughgy. "Oh, well," he added, "this country would forgive him a lot more than that." And he dropped his mischievous banter, which had been entirely to reach Chalkeye through one of the few joints in his armor.

In this it was quite successful and it left Chalkeye moody; and a prolonged silence on his part ended in his remarking when the Doughgy had gone: "He says he doesn't expect to stay here forever."

"Strawberries says?"

"Yes. It was the other day when I told him he'd ought to send his woman back to the hotel. I wish she had taken Jack Saunders."

"Then the Doughgy was right!"

"Damn the Doughgy. I guess Strawberries is figuring that it has lasted—his stay, I mean—a pretty long while now, and maybe back in his home they'll agree some day that it has been long enough. Especially if they're told by reliable parties that he never—" Chalkeye stopped abruptly and reverted to the window. "Of course there's never any use me telling him to do or to quit doing a thing," he finished, moody again. "But," he asserted presently, "he'll work through. That boy'll hold on."

A chance word will sometimes wake us up to unsuspected thoughts. When he said that the boy would work through, he said it to help himself to believe it, and it disclosed to me that a question had been buried alive in my mind ever since Strawberries had taken to lying in bed all day at the Cheyenne Club. Was Strawberries, anchored no longer to his home restraints, drifting toward the rocks? There had been more than playfulness in the Doughgy's banter; Drybone might forgive the boy this and that, but we began to hear that the wives of some of the cattlemen had requested their husbands not to bring him to their ranches any more. I don't know whether he ever got word of this or not; but in looking

back on it all today, it is easy to see that this point is where the sky of Strawberries and of Chalkeye, his loyal sponsor, who was vouching for his present, began to grow overcast.

The Doughgy was reading the latest Cheyenne paper at the hotel. "Hello," said he, "here's another swell Englishman coming our way."

"One of 'em's already more'n I have use for," remarked Jack Saunders, who was dealing cards to himself because there was no one else to deal them to.

The Doughgy grinned at the gambler. "I wouldn't be anxious. This new one ain't likely to wreck your new home."

"What's his name?" asked Saunders with indifference as he continued to deal.

"Let's see, what was it?" said the Doughgy. "His name's Deepmere."

Saunders grunted, and the Doughgy read more items until he had read them all. "Wonder if Strawberries knows him," he remarked.

To this there was not even a grunt in response, and the Doughgy lounged out of the hotel. He met Strawberries in a few minutes and told him the news.

"Deepmere coming!"

And so Strawberries did know him; after that exclamation, he went straight to the hotel. He borrowed the paper and pored over the brief paragraph. He might have been learning the words by heart; but when he looked up, his eyes seemed to be staring at a host of memories, and he sat motionless for a long time, keeping his unconscious hand over the paper where he had laid it on the broad table.

From that same table he had watched the shooting on the night of his arrival; today, with many another experience between, through years of unspoken endurance that the recording angel would surely take into account when his sins should come to be weighed, the experience of a great emotion was breaking like waves against his spirit. I went out of the office, for although he had him-

self so well in hand that no stranger would have been arrested by his aspect, for me it seemed like peeping through the keyhole to be near him during that inward storm.

Afterward, just as after his trance in the post office when he had held the black-edged letter in his hand, he grew loquacious and animated. Even his appearance became more like the boy he had been, and less like the visibly coarsened man he had become.

"That's Deepmere," he said to me the next day in his cabin.

I have often looked at the photograph; a youth in his early twenties, of much the same age as Strawberries had been when he appeared to us in the graveyard that sunny morning in the distant past, while the sage-brush smell was flowing in from the warm, undulated miles. I looked very closely at the face of Deepmere now; handsome, arrogant, impassive; it did not answer the question I was asking; no more did any of those faces on his walls, all handsome, arrogant, impassive.

"We were both at the House," said Strawberries. "Went up together."

So they had been collegemates at Oxford; and I told this to the Doughgy.

The Doughgy asked the same question which I had asked of the impassive photographs. "D'you figure Deepmere's looking forward to meetin' his old friend?"

Some other one of the cow-punchers present rounded this out. "And is the old friend impatient to wring Deepmere's hand?"

Different voices spoke various surmises, until Chalkeye said: "I guess this country don't need any foreigner to tell it what it thinks on any subject."

They united on that. Drybone was not interested in British opinion of Strawberries.

"But," said the Doughgy, "how about it if Strawberries happens to be interested in British opinion?"

Their curiosity was not idle, but it was less keen than mine; and not even to me was the matter of such crucial

moment as it was to Chalkeye: the sponsor's concern for the welfare of his pupil had become a part of his life. I don't know what he might not have done if he had witnessed the meeting which too many of us did see, and which gave the answer to our question. Had nobody been present, or if Strawberries had only avoided the meeting—but why speculate? The exile craved an answer too hungrily, suspense had gone beyond further endurance; that must come to an end; and I am pretty sure that he had grown to believe what he desired to believe, and had persuaded himself that after three years it was all right, it would end well. Chalkeye missed the worst.

Until I reflected that of course Deepmere, having stopped at Cheyenne, was prepared, would not be taken by surprise at coming face to face with Strawberries in this far corner of the earth, I marveled at a performance so perfect. A group lounged in the office waiting for mail; the rattle of the stage brought them as usual to the door to watch its arrival. The stage drove up, the brake scraped against the tire, the mail-sack was flung down, and as the single passenger stepped to the ground, Strawberries appeared out of the office and spoke lightly and casually:

“What are you doing here?”

The casualness was well managed; not a hint of anything out of the common; they might have dined together last night.

The passenger looked at Strawberries blank and straight with an empty eye, as if he was not there.

“Does one get dinner here?” he inquired of everybody in general.

“Dinnes leddy!” screamed Madden from the hotel porch.

“Somewhere to wash, I suppose?” said the passenger, again most impersonally; and walked off.

That was all. A few seconds did the whole of it; not much longer than it needs to whip out a weapon and kill a man. Unbroken silence continued as Deepmere departed, followed by many eyes that could not look at Strawberries. By the sound of his steps, and next by the

distant slam of a door, it was known that he had betaken himself to his cabin.

In there, the photographs awaited him, those handsome, arrogant faces, looking at him out of his past. He knew now what they thought of him; their message had been clearly delivered by his old college friend. When the witnesses of that meeting had shuffled awkwardly into the post office, while the mail was being distributed, they began to mutter their opinions of the old college friend, whom the stage presently took across the bridge to Buffalo; but I doubt if their indignation or their sympathy would have brought much comfort to Strawberries in this hour of his blasting disillusion: the only backing that he craved had been denied him forever.

What could have been in those long letters that he sent home? Had he actually written himself into a belief that the hour was on the way when the ban would be lifted? Nobody will ever know. And what was in the letters that came to him?

These went on coming, but never again was Strawberries seen to answer them.

How could he bring himself to remain at the scene and with the witnesses of his repudiation? Why did he not leave Drybone and go—anywhere—so long as it was among strangers? Perhaps Chalkeye hit the truth when he said that Strawberries had found out where his real friends were.

For a week he kept wholly to himself; and this seclusion was respected by those same witnesses whose eyes had looked away from him at the post office. No word of his ever gave a hint of what was in his mind during this time. Was it a spiritual wrestling match, and did his better self make a stand, even though the door of hope had been shut in his face?

At any rate, at the end of those seven days of isolation, he strolled casually into the hotel one evening, spoke to those he met as if nothing had happened, lounged in the office a while reading the latest papers, and then strolled

on into the gambling saloon, bought some chips and sat down to the game.

I have never seen a cat when, after long patience at a mouse-hole, the mouse appears; but this is what Jack Saunders made me think of as he watched Strawberries enter the door of his den. His eye changed, a sudden light seemed to fill it, and then his usual look of indifference returned. The momentary flare was nothing that the ordinary onlooker would notice, any more than he would see significance in the step Strawberries had taken.

One or two were there who remarked that they had always thought cards were against his principles, but that they must have been mistaken, for he was evidently at home in drawing and betting; with faro likewise he proved familiar; later, he acquired what Drybone could teach him, and taught Drybone some games of chance not in vogue there.

It was Chalkeye, whom I met one night over at Point of Rocks on my way to the railroad and the East who read deeper. He had been for a "Whirl" in Cheyenne, as he expressed it; and after hearing from me the latest news of the country, he began to talk slowly, with many pauses; and it was curious how he began.

"I could have made a dandy cattleman out of him," he said, "if he was going to stay in the country." He did not name Strawberries. It was the way you refer to the dead sometimes, soon after their death.

"Perhaps you will do it yet," said I.

"No."

There was a long pause.

"Does he win or lose?"

"Both."

"Does he play every night?"

"He's at it whenever I drop in."

"What does he do all day?"

"Lies in bed. Gets up at card time."

"Wins, you say?"

"Off and on."

"Saunders will get everything he has." There was an-

other long pause. "You'd think he'd tear those photographs up. They've got no use for him. What use has he got for them any more?"

"Well," said I, "they're likely to be all he will ever see of home."

After an interval, Chalkeye said: "I expect you and I don't need to guess what the trouble was."

This was the plainest word about it he had ever spoken. Silence was my answer to it, and in further silence we sat for a while; I grieved for Chalkeye—he was cut to the depths.

"What is your idea?" he presently asked.

"Why, just that."

"I mean, was it a first offense? Would they come down so hard on just one slip?"

"How should I know?"

"D'you figure that fellow Deepmere represents general opinion?"

"How can I know that, either?"

"D'you figure it has broken his nerve?"

"Why did he begin again?"

"I wonder if he has spotted what kind of game he's buckin'."

We asked each other more questions, like these, which neither of us could answer; it was a way of thinking aloud together. Then Chalkeye drew out a folded handkerchief and showed me a letter it held.

"I was going to get you to put your name to that."

I read:

To all whom this may concern:

We the undersigned desire to state that during the several years we have been acquainted with the bearer, we have never seen him take part in any gambling game, or known of his doing so. His strict abstention from all such pursuits has been conspicuous in a community where card games are a general practice. We have found the gentleman uniformly companionable, manly and upstanding.

To this document many signatures were appended—the names of all the leading men in the county were there.

"They shaped that up for me at the Cheyenne Club," Chalkeye explained. "I got them to do it after that Deepmere fellow had acted that way to him. They claimed it wouldn't do any good. But I thought that if he wanted to go home it might help him some."

He took the letter from my hand and was going to tear it up.

"Oh, no!" said I. "It may come in handy yet, somehow."

He shook his head, but put the paper back in its handkerchief.

"Most folks," he pursued, "can drink safely. Now and then you meet some poor fellow that can't. One glass of anything starts him off, and the day comes when stopping has got beyond him, and the only way for him is never to touch it. Cards are the same with some. Strawberries knew that, you see. And I was betting on him. But his old friend Deepmere happened along. How could you foresee . . ." The cow-puncher's voice failed him, and he paused a moment. "Well," he resumed with regained control, "I could have made a dandy cattleman out of him. Well, guess I'll hit the hay."

That was the last that I saw of Chalkeye for six months.



I came up the river in the stage, and there waiting for me was what I missed in cities every day—the air, the light, the mountains, the open world, the welcome of the sage-brush smell; even a look at the graveyard would have pleased me, but we passed the turnout to it, and I was actually glad to see the horrible hotel. Nothing was changed in Drybone—save the luck of Strawberries.

It was the Doughgy who greeted me with the odd news that Strawberries had suddenly begun to win more than he lost. During the winter he had descended through ups and downs to the bottom of pennilessness; he had parted with one possession after another; he had sold everything that anyone would buy; he had pledged his remittances in advance; he had raffled his three horses; he

was afoot. To be sure, the Doughgy continued, this made small matter to a man in bed all day and at cards all night.

The boys were sorry for him. His woman stuck to him. She was just as crazy about him as the first day. She paid the bills when his credit was gone. How she got the money, several could explain. He was still in deep, but last week Jack Saunders had come back from a visit to Laramie and found Strawberries was winning. Not every night. Madden won off him, but he won more off Madden.

It was ups and downs again, but the ups had it.

"Sounds like a fever chart," said I.

"Fever, all right!" the Doughgy laughed. "Severe case. Madden makes a man think some."

"Another severe case," said I; at which the Doughgy gave me a singular stare.

I saw Strawberries once in this hour of his luck, before going to a ranch for a couple of days. His face had become the blighted countenance which had turned toward me like an apparition on that night of his arrival, after he had been staring in at the gambling den. The fever had burned his youth, and more than his youth, away; if you did not look twice, you would hardly see that he had been a gentleman.

A sudden turn of luck, and at this late day? Two and two can readily be put together, if you have the key. I thought of Saunders and the cat and the mouse. Nothing seemed to fit; yet Strawberries winning seemed of darker portent than Strawberries losing. And then, when I was again in Drybone, Chalkeye unlocked the mystery. I was writing letters up in my room at the hotel, and he walked in without knocking and sat on the edge of my bed.

"I am getting Strawberries out of the country to-night," said he, very quietly, keeping his eye on his boots. That put the two and two together: a new offense, and caught in it here, as at home.

"But," I said, "didn't he know that Jack was certain to see through it?"

"He knew. But he didn't know about Madden?"

"Madden!" I exclaimed. "Madden?"

"Not so loud. Have you supposed the Chink keeps losing his wages for nothing?" The pen fell from my hand, and I listened to him, dazed.

"Four or five are in it. Do you remember that man from Powder River, and the shooting? He had been dissatisfied with the division of spoils. None of that gang is slicker than the Chink. They got tired waiting, so they greased the slide."

"Cat and mouse," I murmured.

"Sure. And his girl was the mouse. She had known the old ways of the establishment. They figured she would be fool enough to think no changes had been made. Jack went to Laramie, Madden played being busy over his wash—well, she found the cards where they wanted her to find them." Chalkeye sighed. "I'll give you all the particulars tomorrow—the time is short."

"You mean," said I, beginning to see through it, "Strawberries fixed those cards and she put them back?"

Chalkeye nodded. "Jack can pay up old scores now. When Strawberries comes to the game tonight, Jack is going to kill him. It's safe because"—here Chalkeye's voice was very quiet—"Strawberries has been winning from some of the boys who trusted him." After a pause, in which he seemed to sum up and select what more he would say, he added in a voice that was strangely toneless: "I don't want Strawberries killed. We are going to where I have told him a woman was buried with her jewels. I've said it would be death if they caught us. He'll dig. He'd never have stooped so low, once. Then I've fixed up a fake alarm. He'll go. He'll stay gone, I guess. I guess," Chalkeye concluded, "Strawberries would have held on if Deepmere hadn't happened along."

"None of this appeals to me very much," I said. "Why invent—"

"Do you think it appeals to me?" he interrupted, flaming into sudden violence. "Find a better way."

"Let him have the truth."

The puncher's eyes fell, and by that I read his heart.

"Not easy for you," I pursued, touching his knee, "but surely better for him?"

Still he held his eyes averted. He was bent over with trouble. "I couldn't be sure—" he began; he left it unsaid, and again I read his heart. To let the man he had loved and vouched for have the truth was a bitterness beyond his courage, and worse still, he feared there was not enough man left in Strawberries to stand up to it and kill, or be killed. By his fantastic scheme of the jewels, he had provided a way out. But what a way!

"I'd let it alone," said I.

"No, you wouldn't."

He walked out without another word, and I listened to the slow and heavy tread of his boots down the stairs.

I sat with my pen in hand, writing nothing and forgetting time, while the day faded; until Madden called loudly from below that I would soon be too late for supper.

The day grew wholly dark, the lamps burned in the saloon, shining on the stacks of bottles and the pictures of pink women; and the usual group, with a few stray players, gathered at the tables. The sound of chips and of the voices betting were very distinct in the quiet house. The breath of the sage-brush, the breath of the wilderness, the eternal, impassive witness of our deeds and lives, came through the open door.

I saw Jack Saunders look up and then continue his game. Some time elapsed, and he looked up again, watching the door; this time he whispered some impatient word to his neighbor, and the playing went on. It was a good hour later that something far off made one listen, and I saw the head of Saunders jerk up quickly. There were shots very distant; that was all; and once again the gambler muttered to his neighbor.

This time he did not resume playing, but sat scowling at the door. The figure he watched for did not come.

A sort of dreariness dulled me, thinking it all over; it

was all degraded and dreary; and I got up to go to bed. As I crossed the office the girl entered and went straight to the saloon door. By her theatrical pose it was plain that the lust for telling sensational news was on her—but Saunders spoke first.

"To hell with *you*," said he. "Where's the tame pet you're keeping?"

Then she had her triumph and her climax; and her voice rose to the level of it.

"Gone where you'll never get him, Jack Saunders! Chalkeye has got you fooled!"

The gambler sprang up and listened to nothing more. While she continued ranting to her heart's content, he dragged on his chaps, snatched his quirt, buckled his holster, and would have been out to get his horse, but Chalkeye stood in the office. Saunders shot so quickly that I did not see him fire; and almost as quickly the puncher shot back. I think both missed; but neither stopped.

They passed me and went out of the house. I heard them as they moved through the dark, firing, and I heard myself counting the shots mechanically; they seemed to cut a trail in the night, they went on and on; and when they ceased, I had forgotten how many I had counted. I was standing in the office where I had been when it began; I had not moved a step.

No one else was in the house, and now I remembered that I had seen them running by. I remained quite still, and next saw the Doughgy at the door.

"Chalkeye is dead," said he. "Both are dead. Maybe you would like to come up and help fix Chalkeye."

"Come up?"

"Saunders ran from him when he found he was hit. Chalkeye followed him upstairs to his woman's room. He shot Chalkeye from the floor."

The puncher lay across the threshold, a wound through his breast, the only one. Somewhere in the back of the room people were attending to Saunders—I didn't notice. The Doughgy and I did not touch Chalkeye at

once; we stood and looked at his quiet face. There was no violence in it; he lay in a sort of dignity, and there was a grace in the repose of his long arms.

It may have been minutes that we stood looking at the face.

"He thinks it is just as well," said the Doughgy. "He had changed a heap. Dying would not have suited him a little bit, once. He loved living up to the hilt. Better company I never traveled with. Gosh, how he could ride. Yes, these last years had changed him. It must be tough to see the apple of your eye go rotten."

Something in the dead man's pocket caught my sight, and I stooped and pulled out a handkerchief and unfolded a letter and handed it to the Doughgy. It was not too stained to be read, and the Doughgy began aloud, "To all whom this may concern," and then read silently; but when he had gone a few lines he turned his head away, and I took the sheet from his hand as he walked to the window and stood with his back to me looking out into the darkness.

So these two also went to the hill of upright and fallen headboards. At the end of the burying, the Doughgy and I lingered in the sun and the silence, looking off at the undulating miles.

"Do you remember the morning when Strawberries came up the river and Chalkeye borrowed your glasses?"

"Oh, yes. I remember."

"They say the Elkhorn Railroad will get as far as this next year," said the Doughgy. "Good-by, Old West. I shouldn't wonder if I pulled my freight for a new country one of these days."

He did; and from him in California, I had two of the three glimpses of Strawberries I still have to tell after his path wound away from mine. Once from Redlands the Doughgy wrote me that he had seen Strawberries clerking in the What Cheer House, in that town. Strawberries had not seen him; and soon after had lost this job. Again the Doughgy wrote during the days when the Western Pacific was being constructed across Nevada.

"I was getting good pay as foreman of a bridge gang," he said; "and one night I went to the honkatonk to spend some and make a night of it. Strawberries was pounding a piano as professional player for a roomful of drunken girls with their men. I didn't spend my money. I went out."

My last news was in 1910, when I ran up the river from Cheyenne in a flivver. Two railroads had come. There was a new town called Casper. Drybone had long been wholly abandoned. There were oil claims. Along the river where the sage-brush had grown and the cattle had been rounded up were fields and fruit and fences: not everywhere: but it was gone, the true, real thing was gone.

The scenery was there, but the play was over.

Just a touch, a whiff of the past met me as we crossed La Parelle Creek. We came to some high sage-brush along a bottom, and I smelled it, and one of those sudden cravings for days bygone rushed over me—to hunt, to camp, to revel in young joys; I longed to speak some magic word and evoke the golden years—no others—and live them again, and then pass on, or pass out, or whatever follows this. We came to the turnout for the graveyard. It was visible still, but I did not wish to look at that. Then we reached what had been Drybone.

"I'll get out here," I said to the young, green chauffeur.

"There's nothing here."

"I know. There used to be. Wait here."

I walked through weeds, and splinters of sheds, and rusted objects. Three boards of the hotel were standing. Part of the post office was there. The cabin of luxury was fairly whole, and all around it gleamed empty tin cans. There was a door; and when I saw that, I walked up and opened it.

He was lying in bed, reading a paper.

"Oh, there you are!" he said.

So he had come back, actually summoned by that same Past which we had shared for a while, the Past where his

real friends had been! I liked this remnant of the man better than ever I had liked the man.

"Thank God somebody has come to lunch," said he. "Now I'll have to get up and cook something."

This he did; and for an hour we talked about anything to keep off the one thing in our minds. The photographs were there. I suppose the widow had sent things after him. And now he lay in bed and ate tinned food, unless company happened by.

The young, green chauffeur came to see what had become of me, and as I was walking away, Strawberries stood in his door.

"It all used to be very jolly," he said.

I nodded and walked on.

"I say," he called.

I turned. There he stood, and into his face came a something that recalled the old smile like a pressed flower.

"Chalkeye was a good fellow, you know."

"Yes."

"I liked Chalkeye."

"Yes."

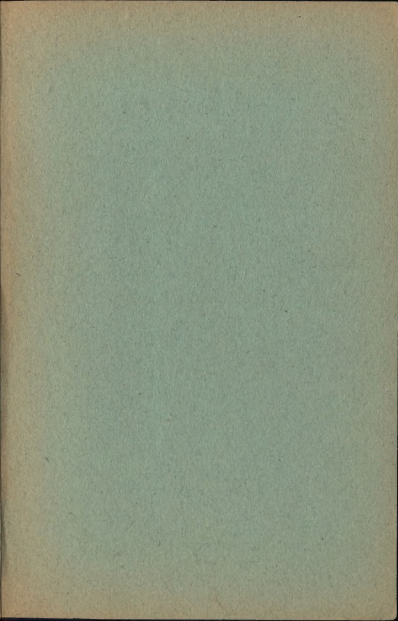
"I suppose you're thinking he was a better fellow than me?"

"Yes."

"Right."

THE END

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